**UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA**

# The Process of Support Seeking Behaviour Online

**by**

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## ABSRACT

The research on Internet-based support groups has been limited and not focused on adolescents or issues related to suicide. There are Internet websites available to adolescents that focus on suicide prevention through social support provided in online message boards. One such message board was examined using qualitative methodology to reveal how the participants experience the process of seeking support online for issues related to suicide. Content-based analysis was also used to identify the major themes of the participants' experiences, including: self harm, depression/anxiety, developmental issues (finding purpose and identity development), family relationships, peer relationships, and romantic/intimate relationships. General themes of support seeking included narrative expression and community development. The responses of the other members of the online community were also summarized. The implications of these findings serve to expand the present understanding of issues that contribute to suicidal behaviour and highlight how the Internet can be used to facilitate suicide prevention.

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# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The desire to be understood is common to all people. From our first sounds as an infant we attempt to communicate with others. Throughout a person's development, communication takes different forms and throughout history, a variety of methods have developed to facilitate it. In recent times, technologies such as the Internet have revolutionized communication. As is often the case, those who grow up with a new technology are most comfortable with it. Today, adolescents communicate through the Internet as comfortably as the generation before them used telephones. Unlike the telephone, however, the Internet can be used to seek out new information and establish new relationships. This difference allows modern adolescents to use the Internet, rather than face-to-face interactions, when they need information or support. Adolescents use the Internet most often to talk to their friends from school or home, but those who feel they cannot talk to anyone else in their life may search the Internet to find someone who understands them. Such an adolescent will find many others online with whom to connect.

Over the past few years I have had the opportunity to hear from a number of adolescents who talked about their experiences with being suicidal and seeking help on the Internet. Although I was aware that many of today's youth were quite comfortable online, I was surprised to hear how valuable adolescents found their online experiences. Specifically, they seemed to view their online relationships as key sources of social support in times of need. Because of the serious nature of adolescent suicide, it is essential to understand how adolescents are using the

Internet to cope. Research in this area is very limited due to the novelty of the Internet. To begin to address gaps in the research, this study examines the original transcripts of an Internet-based social support group to begin to understand the experiences of adolescents who are suicidal and seek help from others online.

## Importance of the Study

### *Understanding Suicide*

Suicide is far more than a tragic event; it is a complex process that involves the individual in the context of a community. Individuals who commit suicide tend to have been struggling with thoughts about suicide and feelings of pain and ambivalence for a long time. The process of an individual being suicidal affects their families, friends, community, and society as a whole. In fact, suicidal behaviour in one family member may result in other family members choosing similar responses to distress in the future. Using a conservative estimate of seven individuals personally affected by every suicide death and act of intentional self harm, over 2.8 million Canadians are affected annually (Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, 2004). This estimate suggests that suicidal and self harm behaviours are phenomena that are intrinsically connected to the community context. A suicidal individual is not only affected by the other people in their life, but directly influences them as well.

### *Adolescents and Suicide*

Recent work in the experiences of adolescents and suicide (Bostik, 2003) suggests that risk of suicide may be related to developmental issues, specifically peer and parental attachment relationships. Adolescence is a time when the

developing sense of self in relation to peers and community puts adolescents at risk for self-doubt, depression, and self-destructive behaviour. The suicide rate for Canadian youth is the third highest in the industrialized world and more young Canadians die by suicide than by disease or by most other forms of injury (World Health Organization, 2002). Research into how adolescents report the process of being suicidal will build on our present understanding of the issues and experiences of this population. This understanding may lead to practical suggestions for helping suicidal adolescents.

### *Suicide Prevention*

Recent research into this tragic problem leads to the hope that prevention is possible. Much research contributes to a broad understanding of the prevalence, risk factors, and the process of being suicidal. Examining the statistics on suicide provides one way to understand the magnitude of the problem, but provides little insight into how suicide affects individuals on a personal, emotional level. Research that explores thoughts, emotions, and behaviours of those who are suicidal reveals a deeper understanding of the experiences of individuals. Where prevalence studies are likely to indicate the impact of the problem, an understanding of individual experiences reveals how we can help. Although there is a growing amount of research on the experience of people who engage in suicidal behaviour and some understanding of how social support may operate to help them be resilient, there is no research available on how the Internet is being used for this purpose.

*Adolescents and the Internet*

The Internet is a phenomena that most adolescents are familiar with, but many of the adults in their lives are not. In recent years the Internet has become a primary source of information and communication (Tapscott, 1998). Having grown up with computers and the Internet, many adolescents are adept at using a variety of online communications such as message boards, chat lines, and online messaging. These technologies are used to develop and foster relationships as well as seek out information (Borzekowski & Rickert, 2001). As such, the Internet has become one of the first places that modern adolescents turn to in times of distress. Internet-based support may not only provide opportunity to help adolescents who are in crisis, but online communities may provide a number of benefits over face-to-face groups including: anonymity, easy access, and low-cost support. Although there is much potential for using online communication to help adolescents who are thinking about suicide and who may not seek help otherwise, little research is available on how adolescents use the Internet as a source of support.

Recently there have been thousands of Internet-based support groups established that have very different purposes and structures. Some of the most thoughtfully developed and run of these groups have also been researched and some of those studies will be reviewed in the literature review. Although many of these groups purport to be therapeutic and report positive results, many groups online do not screen participants nor are the discussions monitored. These groups can be beneficial to members, but may also lead to negative consequences such as

Internet predation. Such consequences of irresponsible support providers have lead to skepticism about Internet-based therapy in general. Regardless of the validity of such skepticism, King and Moreggi (1998) succinctly summarize the view of those in the field by saying "the question of whether this (Internet-based therapy) should be done is now moot, there is no way to regulate the exchange of information on the Internet" (p. 108). People are seeking help via the Internet; the best that professionals can do is try to understand and integrate this fact into present understandings of support and therapy.

## Purpose of the Study

The present research is meant to help fill the gap in knowledge about online support communities as well as to provide insight into the experiences of those in the community. Kraut et al. (2004) suggested that "many online forums make visible psychological phenomena that would be much more difficult to study in traditional settings. Some phenomena, like the evolution of groups… are difficult to study because of the difficulties and costs of tracking many individuals over long periods" (p. 106). This study uses the original transcripts from online discussions to help answer the following questions:

What is the process of support seeking behaviour on this website?

How does the Internet facilitate social support?

What type of relationships are formed?

How are relationships formed?

What are the common themes of the experience of being suicidal or supporting someone who is suicidal?

How do the other members of the online community support those who seek help?

## Methodological Framework

Of the available research, most studies provide a glimpse into the experiences of suicidal adolescents within the confines of quantitative research methodology. When exploring a phenomena as novel as seeking help online, it would be premature to focus on outcome before the process of support seeking is understood. For this reason, the research method used must allow for the representation of seeking help as a process, rather than focus on the outcome. Because the primary goal of this study is to gain an understanding of the process that occurs in online support seeking for suicidal adolescents, a qualitative research design was chosen as the most appropriate method of study.

## Definition of Terms

The terminology used in this thesis are defined as follows:

The **Internet** is the system of interconnected computer networks that carries various information and services, such as electronic mail (email), online chat, and the interlinked web pages. The term **online** refers to anything that is based in the Internet, and **offline** refers to anything that is not Internet related.

**Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), online communication,** and **Internet-based communication** refer to communication between people that occurs through the Internet via a computer. Examples of CMC are: email, websites, chat rooms, and instant messaging. **Email** is a message that is sent from one person to one or many other through the Internet. A **website** is an Internet-

based space where individuals can write messages, post pictures, and exchange information. A **message board** is the part of a website where individuals read messages left by others and write messages to others. A message board may be accessible to everyone who has access to the Internet, or it may be password protected and only available to those with access. A **thread** is one part of the message board that contains a single conversation. A thread is analogous to a single conversation that occurs in a room where many people are talking to each other. A **message/post** is a single message within a conversation thread. **Chat** refers to a conversation that can only be seen by those in the conversation and messages are read as they are written in real-time. **Synchronous/Asynchronous** refer to the temporal nature of the exchange of messages. Communication online can be exchanged as quickly as it is written, but most often messages are left and responded to at a later time. Conversations that occur in real-time (read as soon as they are received and responded to immediately) are called **synchronous** and conversations that occur intermittently are called **asynchronous.** Message boards and email are generally asynchronous, whereas chat is synchronous.

**Suicide** is the intentional act of self injury that results in death. **Suicidal ideation** includes thoughts about self injury that may or may not result in death. **Self harm** includes all acts of intentional self injury that does not result in death. Common examples of self harm include cutting and burning one's self.

## Order of Presentation

The chapters of this thesis are organized as follows:

Chapter Two, **Review of the Literature**, presents a review of the

literature on suicide, interpersonal relationships in adolescent development, adolescent Internet use, Internet-based social support, and Internet-based social support groups. The focus of the review is to highlight the issues that contribute to an adolescent's experience of Internet-based social support.

Chapter Three, **Methodology,** is a description of the content-based analysis used in this study and the rationale for its use. The procedure used in data collection, sampling, and analysis are discussed.

Chapter Four, **Participants,** introduces the website, the discussions, participants, and online community. In depth description is given of those community members who participated in more than one of the message board discussions.

Chapter Five, **Results,** presents the outcome of the analysis of the data and the themes that emerged.

Chapter Six, **Discussion**, presents an interpretation of the results that suggests how this interpretation may be integrated with the existing literature and how it may inform future prevention and treatment programs.

# CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

## Review of the Literature on Adolescent Internet Use

### *General Internet Use*

Recently, the Internet has replaced television as the primary leisure activity for many young people (Thurlow & McKay, 2003). Although the Internet is available in most parts of the world, only 9% of the world's population is actually online (Thurlow & McKay, 2003). The actual number of people online varies greatly between parts of the world, with North America and Europe being among the most Internet savvy. In countries where the Internet is widely available, adolescents are using it for two main purposes: information gathering and communication (Tapscott, 1998).

The Internet is a powerful information search tool. Individuals may find nearly unlimited amounts of information on an almost infinite number of topics. Adolescents find the Internet an easy educational resource as well as a source of information on personal issues such as health, sex, and substance use (Suzuki & Calzo, 2004). Tate and Zabinski (2004) suggest that adolescents may use the Internet as an anonymous way to access information that they would not access otherwise because of fear of social stigma (e.g. may visit sites on exploring one's sexual orientation).

The Internet is quickly replacing the telephone as the main technology for communication (Thurlow & McKay, 2003). Suler (1996) suggests that adolescents spend most of their time online in four main types of Internet resources: webpages, email dyads and groups, chat rooms/instant messaging, and

message boards. The fact that three out of four of these are for communication, rather than entertainment or information, supports Thurlow and Mckay's (2003) conclusion that the attraction of the Internet for adolescents is mostly social. This finding is consistent with the developmental literature that suggests that interpersonal relationships are central to adolescent development (Lerner, 2002). It would seem that adolescents who use the Internet, do so as another form of technology to meet the common developmental needs to establish relationships and form peer groups (Gross, 2004). Where adolescents use Internet technology to establish and maintain relationships, the question remains: how do the differences between communication online and offline influence these relationships?

### *Online Relationships*

Interpersonal relationships are based on communicating thoughts and feelings between people. Some researchers have found that online communication is similar to face-to-face contact because the form of the message may not change the content (Salem, Seidman, & Rappaport, 1988). However, facial expression and voice tonality, pitch, and timbre are all important qualities in face-to-face contact that are unavailable online (King & Moreggi, 1998). It is likely that the degree to which an online message reflects the same content as it would offline depends on the experiences and assumptions of those who interpret the message. Although the differences in communication form may be superficial, the differences that exist are likely to influence the development and nature of online relationships.

Walther and Boyd (2002) suggest that the nature of online relationships are best described as "weak ties," where close offline relationships are "strong ties," because of the lack of physical presence in the relationships. Rather than a downfall of Internet relationships, these weak ties allow support seekers and providers to express a greater diversity of experiences and advice without fear of judgment and the opportunity to compare one's own experience to many others without pressure to conform. The authors also suggest that the strength of the online relational ties are likely to depend on aspects of the specific community, where some online communities feel much more emotionally connected with each other than other communities. In fact, some researchers have found higher levels of emotional support and self-disclosure in online communication (Salem, Seidman, & Rappaport, 1988). Disclosures help create relational bonds between individuals which often combine when many individuals interact to form an online community (Katz & Aspden, 1997).

### *Online Community*

Although most online adolescent interactions involve communication with friends who were already part of their offline lives (Gross, 2004), the Internet provides individuals the opportunity to connect with others who have similar concerns, where it may not be possible otherwise. King and Moreggi (1998) suggest that the number and type of online communities is increased by the ability to find peers online, regardless of how esoteric the topic. For example, an adolescent who is feeling suicidal may not know anyone offline who feels the same way and may search the Internet to find a group of people who are

experiencing the same issues. Through sharing feelings, experiences, and advice, online communities develop and share norms and values in the same way as offline communities.

In a survey of participants of an Internet-based group, 78.7% who responded reported that they had a sense of community online (Roberts, Smith, & Pollock, 2001). The authors go on to explore the sense of online community in terms of the four elements included in the development of a sense of community outlined by McMillan and Chavis (1986): membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Tichon and Shapiro (2003) suggest that self-disclosure is used online to promote community by initiating support, providing examples of shared experience, and sharing a reciprocal social relationship. These social relationships make up the fabric of the online communities that allow individuals to share experiences and provide support for each other.

### *The Attraction of Online Communication*

The Internet's popularity as a unique communication tool has been acknowledged by a number of researchers. Internet-based communication differs from offline communication in several major aspects: increased accessibility, confidentiality/ anonymity, capacity, and control (Madara, 1999). These are similar to the dimensions suggested by Walter and Boyd (2002) who reviewed the online-support literature and summarized reasons for the attraction of online communication. Each of these features influences aspects of the support process and allows participants to experience phenomena such as the

hyperpersonal/disinhibition effect and narrative catharsis. Both of these phenomena are likely to play significant roles in the experience of seeking support online. The aspects of online communication that are attractive to those seeking support online are given particular relevance when one considers some of the problems that support seekers face in finding support offline.

*Accessibility*

The Internet is potentially available from any computer that has access to a telephone line or cable connection. This accessibility allows individuals to overcome geographic and temporal barriers. Individuals may access support if they live in a location where support is not available offline, if they move, or are traveling and unable to access traditional offline resources. Support services may be available at any time of day or night so an individual can post a message when they are in distress and supportive members can respond at any time (Salem & Bogat, 2000).

*Anonymity*

Most personal sites allow individuals to interact anonymously. Anonymity allows an individual greater confidentiality by keeping personal disclosures from people in their offline lives. Salem and Bogat (2000) suggest that members recognize anonymity as a significant attraction of the online group. Individuals can be reasonably certain that those they meet online will not recognize them offline and therefore may feel less social pressure in the online community. They may feel more comfortable expressing emotions and discussing personal problems such as abuse, depression, suicide or sexuality (Barrera, Glasgow,

McKay, Boles, and Feil, 2002). In some cases, individuals may not feel comfortable seeking help offline at all, and view online support as their only option (e.g. online therapy for agoraphobia, see Madara, 1999). Thus, the anonymity offered by the Internet may ameliorate delays in seeking treatments related to shame, time, or lack of opportunity (Tate & Zabinski, 2004).

*Capacity*

Another aspect of Internet communication that has implications for social support abilities is the limitless capacity. Because the message boards generally have limitless space available and limitless membership, an individual seeking support is less limited by the availability of others. Individuals may write as many messages at any length as they feel they need.

*Control*

Individuals have complete control of their involvement in the online community. This control begins even as one is deciding whether or not to participate in the community. A new participant can read the messages of others in the community before writing messages themselves. This allows them to learn the norms and culture set in the group. A non-writing group member may also obtain information or vicarious support without having to disclose anything about themselves and obtain validation for their feelings without having to express those feelings. Being fully informed about the nature and culture of the community, an individual can decide the degree to which they wish to be involved in the community as well as the identity they wish to present online. Once involved, the participant has the ability to ignore any message they want to, or even withdraw

from the community at any time.

*Hyperpersonal/Disinhibition effect*

Another commonly cited effect of online communication is the hyperpersonal or disinhibition effect, where individuals feel more personally connected to others online because of the perceived poignancy of the messages (King & Moreggi, 1998; Walther & Boyd, 2002; Wright & Bell, 2003). Although at first it may seem counter-intuitive, online communication has been shown to enhance perceptions of intimacy by activating specific psychological processes. King and Moreggi (1998) suggest people may feel as though they have more in common with others online because they project aspects of their own feelings into the void that is left by the lack of non-verbal cues. This allows individuals to feel as though they understand and are understood by their friends online.

Walther and Boyd (2002) suggest that online communication hides the aspects in which members differ from one another, highlighting the specific impression an individual wishes to reveal. Using a written medium, the individual can control the message they wish to present and may express a more deliberate and effective expression than one would manage offline. Waldron, Lavitt, and Kelley (2000) suggest that Internet-based communication tends to be more personal because one can take more time writing a message which then may be more distilled and poignant, like poetry. The extra time available also allows one to create a "good" request and/or a "good" response, without the apparent interruptions as one searches for the words, external advice, and/or external references.

*Narrative Expression*

Wright and Bell (2003) suggest that a large part of the benefit of expressing one's self on the Internet is related to the therapeutic effect of writing one's story for others to read. They suggest that the Internet technology highlights the written narrative in a way that uniquely facilitates narrative expression and catharsis of emotion. This suggestion is supported by Pennebaker's (1990) original work with people who found that writing about experiences and emotions helps them to cope with difficult experiences.

*Problems with Offline Support*

For some people, the Internet may provide support that ameliorates some of the common problems that can occur in the context of conventional therapy (Walther & Boyd, 2002). These problems include: mismatching (support seeker/support provider), cost of giving (stress related to providing social support), and the cost of therapy (therapist fees). With Internet-based support, individuals can read the messages written by those in the community they are considering disclosing personal information to, thus placing the ownership on the support seeker to decide what type of support they want. The social distance inherent in Internet communication may allow support providers to maintain more social distance than is possible offline. Stress on the support provider is also ameliorated when the community provides support rather than one individual. Finally, because most online support tends to be free, individuals may receive as much support as they feel is necessary. Although Internet-based therapeutic interventions will never be able to replace offline interventions, the aspects of

online communication discussed here may make specific therapeutic interventions more available and effective online.

### *Summary of Adolescent Internet Use*

Modern adolescents use the Internet as comfortably as the telephone or face-to-face conversation. In fact, for some purposes, adolescents may value the aspects of the Internet that allow them more anonymity, accessibility, and control and prefer online communication to offline communication. Because of these essential differences in the communication medium, communicating through the Internet is likely to change some aspects of online relationships; especially those relationships that are initiated online. Adolescents seeking peer groups may feel better understood by others online, where they feel safe disclosing personal experiences and feel socially supported. Especially for adolescents, online social support may provide a sense of validation, support, and encouragement from others with similar experiences, and may facilitate support seeking from relationships in the offline world (Barrera et al., 2002). Online social support may offer solutions to some of the problems with offline communication, but may best be used in combination with offline resources.

## Review of the Literature on Interpersonal Relationships in Adolescent Development

Adolescence is a developmental phase characterized by an increased awareness of interpersonal relationships. These relationships provide the context for negotiating developmental issues including identity formation and the search for purpose/meaning. Interpersonal relationships with peers allow an adolescent a

sense of identification with other individuals and groups, providing reference points for an individual's sense of identity (McAdams, Josselson & Leiblich, 2001). These relationships also provide a source of social support in times of stress. Relationships with parents and other adults are often quite different than during other developmental stages, as the adolescent explores their sense of independence by creating distance from parents and closer relationships with peers. For these developmental reasons, adolescents may be more likely to seek social support from their peers than their parents in times of stress. When these relationships breakdown, many modern adolescents turn to their peers using the Internet to seek social support and advice.

### *The Impact of Relationship Breakdown and Loneliness*

Relationships are often sources of strength in times of distress, although other factors also influence an individual's state of mind. When these relationships break down, the source of strength may be lost and the individual's state of mind may deteriorate. From previous literature we know that the breakdown of relationships is central to the experience of being suicidal (Everall, 2000). An examination of the literature on loneliness may facilitate an understanding of the experience of being suicidal as well as the role that social support plays in intervention.

Loneliness has been defined as the subjective feeling that one's personal network of social relationships is less satisfying than one desires (Andersson, 1998; Peplau, Russel, & Heim, 1979). The positive polar opposite of loneliness and isolation is social support (Pretty, Andrewes, & Collett, 1994). Morahan-

Martin and Schumacher (2003) suggest that lonely people tend to have either (1) fewer social skills or (2) less opportunity for social interaction. For both types of individuals, the Internet may provide an opportunity to establish or maintain relationships that may otherwise not have been possible. For example, an adolescent whose friend has moved away may be able to remain in contact with him/her through the Internet. On the other hand, an individual who is isolated because he/she has poor face-to-face social skills or less opportunity for social interaction may exacerbate the problem by spending time online. Although researchers are generally agreed that feelings of loneliness may be ameliorated through social support (Thoits, 1982), the role of Internet-based communication is highly controversial.

### *Loneliness and the Internet*

Many researchers have indicated that there is a relationship between loneliness and Internet use (Kraut, et al., 1998; Lavin, Marvin, McLarney, Nola & Scott, 1999; Morahan-Martin, 1999; Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995). However, not all studies report similar results. Some authors suggest that the Internet causes isolation from offline relationships, where others suggest that individuals may increase their Internet use and even develop Internet-related problems because they are lonely (Morahan-Martin, 1999). Ho and Lee (2001) found that Internet use correlated with decreased family involvement, decreased number(s) of friends, and increases in depression and loneliness. Kraut, et al. (1998) completed a two-year longitudinal study and found that Internet use was associated with declines in participants' communication with family members, declines in the size

of social circles, and increases in depression and loneliness. However, Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, Kraut, and Gross (2001) summarized the research by suggesting that moderate Internet use does not negatively impact children's social skills and activities. In fact, they found that email and online messaging may help friends maintain contact. In a survey of Australian adolescents, Donchi (2003) found that higher reliance on the Internet was associated with less reliance on face-to-face contact. They also found that those who used the Internet for social contact reported less loneliness. Thus, there is no consensus in the literature regarding the nature or strength of the relationship between general Internet use in general and loneliness.

Morahan-Martin (2003) attempted to explicate the issue by suggesting that loneliness caused by the Internet is state dependent whereas those who use the Internet because they are lonely may be experiencing a more long-term (trait) dependent type of loneliness. She suggested that individuals who tend to be lonely before going online may find that online social interaction has a number of benefits including greater social control and less social pressure. Morahan-Martin further suggested the friendships made for the lonely-online are reported as being highly satisfying. Similarly, Gross, Juvonen, and Gable (2002) found that Internet-based social activity can be beneficial, particularly for anxious and lonely adolescents. Eastin and LaRose (2004) added that those who actively seek help online, tend it. They go on to say that cognitive factors (such as self efficacy) interact to determine how satisfying the individual perceives social support online.

The literature suggests that individuals who seek social communication on the Internet are likely to find it and report less loneliness than those who engage in primarily non-social online activities. Because people are using the Internet to fill social needs, the Internet may also provide social support to individuals who are suicidal and may facilitate suicide prevention.

## Review of the Literature on Suicide

### *Overview of the Problem*

In recent years, suicide has become a topic of increasing research and social concern. In 2004, the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention (CASP) released the CASP Blueprint for a Canadian National Suicide Prevention Strategy (Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, 2004). The first goal of this strategy is to promote awareness of the prevalence and prevention opportunities for suicide. According to reports by the Centre for Suicide Prevention (Centre for Suicide Prevention, 2003), the suicide rate in Canada is higher than in many industrialized countries and over 4,000 Canadians die by suicide every year, representing 2% of all Canadian deaths. Canada has lost on average 11 people per day to suicide throughout the 1990s and through to today. The rates of suicide for individuals in rural communities, particularly First Nations and Inuit people, are a serious concern of tragic proportions. A report from Health Canada (2002) reported that suicide accounts for 24% of deaths for youth between the ages of 15 and 24 in 1998.

The Centre for Suicide Prevention (Centre for Suicide Prevention, 2003) also reports statistics on self harm behaviour, suggesting that over 400,000

Canadians deliberately harm themselves every year, a rate 100 times higher than rates of suicide deaths. Self harm can be understood as a way to cope with psychological distress (Favazza & Rosenthal, 1993). The large number of people engaging in self harming actions may be one result of the increased levels of stress and resulting mental health problems evident in our current society (Bland, Newman, & Dyck, 1994; Kerkhof, 1994). The nature of the relationship between self harm behaviour and suicide has been debated, but the self-destructive nature of both acts as well as their common co-occurrence lend to the perception that they are behaviours that are related to similar experiences of psychological pain.

### *The Suicidal Process*

Understanding suicide as a process creates a basis for understanding how many aspects of an individual's feelings and experiences contribute to self harm and suicidal behaviour (Chesley & Loring-McNulty, 2003). In contrast to more medical models of suicide, the process-oriented theory of suicide, conceptualizes suicidal behaviour by suggesting that it changes over time as an attempt to cope with psychological pain (Leenaars, 1996). The process may include thoughts and feelings that are common to all people, but may be exacerbated by personal, situational, and relational factors. Because of its basis in changing intra-psychic and interpersonal difficulties, suicidal behaviour also follows an ebb and flow over time. An individual may attempt suicide at one point and go on to be non-suicidal for many years before becoming suicidal once again later in life.

Leenaars (1996) described suicide as a multi-dimensional malaise and elaborated on the intra-psychic and interpersonal factors that contribute to suicidal

behaviour over time. Intra-psychic factors are those factors that contribute to an individual's perception of psychological pain as well as their inability to cope. Often a suicidal individual experiences psychological pain, characterized by feeling hopeless, helpless, afraid, trapped, and/or rejected. These feelings are exacerbated by the tendency to focus only on the painful stimuli. One factor that has been highlighted is the individual's own thought patterns (Firestone & Firestone, 1998). Often, suicidal individuals consider themselves too weak to face the difficulties presented to them.

Interpersonal factors contribute to suicidal behaviour by influencing intra-psychic factors such as psychological pain, but also affects suicidal behaviour more directly by influencing the suicidal individual's ability to access social support (Leenaars, 1996). The role of individual relationships has recently been discussed within the context of attachment theory, suggesting that secure early peer and parent relationships leads to greater resilience later in life (Bostik, 2003). It appears that the development of strong interpersonal relationships is a protective factor against suicide, whereas the breakdown of relationships is a risk factor.

Specific triggers for suicidal behaviour depend on personal and developmental factors that are unique to each individual (Leenaars, 1996). Developmental issues specific to adolescents may include peer and parent relationships, the search for meaning, and developing independence. By allowing the suicidal person to lead the discussion about their experience of being suicidal, a therapist will gain a better understanding of how the person's gender, cultural

background, and developmental stage combine with their specific thought patterns and emotional experiences. Returning control to the individual may be of particular importance when working with adolescents who are seeking independence (Leenaars, Wilde, Wenckstern, & Kral, 2001). Recent studies have indicated the potential of narrative approaches, which allow the individual to share their own understanding of how they became suicidal (Michel, et al., 2002). Although these approaches highlight the importance of personal control in resiliency, social support also plays a central role in suicide prevention.

## Review of the Literature on Internet-based Social Support

Because the social networks of suicide attempters tend to be weaker then non-suicidal individuals (Heikkinen, Aro, & Lonnqvist, 1992), strong social relationships that provide social support are central to resiliency. Most of the literature on social support does not focus on Internet-based relationships. However, in recent years the Internet has become such a common form of communication, and enough people have had personal experience with providing and receiving interpersonal social support via the Internet, that an exploration of how the Internet is being used to facilitate social support is warranted.

### *Social Support*

Social support is defined as "the degree to which a person's basic social needs are gratified through interaction with others" (Thoits, 1982), or as "material, informational, or emotional resources that, when exchanged among individuals, (are) perceived by the recipient as beneficial" (Weinberg & Marlowe, 1983). The concept of social support has been examined by many researchers who

have suggested a number of systems to describe different types of social support (see Andersson, 1998 for a more comprehensive review). Walther and Boyd (2002) suggest that similar types of social support may be provided through online and offline communication. These types of support include: informational support (advice, factual input, feedback), emotional support (expressions of caring, concern, empathy, affection, emotional understanding, relieving pain and stress- psychological wellbeing rather than decisional issues), esteem support (expressing admiration and/or understanding another's worth, complimentary statements about skills and/or abilities), and social network support (tying the individual into the community).

In a comparison of the types of social support in different groups, Alexander, Peterson, and Hollingshead (2003) found that informational, emotional, esteem, and tangible support were all found in each of four online support groups. However, they found higher levels of emotional and esteem support in the group for depression than the groups for cancer, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, or alcoholism. These findings support Walther and Boyd's (2002) suggestion that both specific aspects of online communication as well as the type of online community will influence the degree to which each type of support is provided.

### *Process of Social Support*

Social support is a process that occurs in the context of a relationship and involves the expression of need and the reciprocal exchange of help. In summarizing the process, Andersson (1998) states that individuals turn first to

their established social network and if support cannot be found, then individuals may seek support outside (from formal or informal support systems). However, the individual's tendency to seek support outside of their regular support system will likely depend on their comfort level in doing so as determined by culture, age, ability, etc. Therefore, individuals who seek support online may do so because they do not have access to, or do not feel comfortable, seeking support through their regular support systems. This may be especially true when seeking support for sensitive topics such as suicide, gender issues, and relationship issues. Research into the process of social support had not focused on the sustainability of social support resources over time, such as in an online community context. However, there are recent studies that describe how social support has been provided online.

### *Online Social Support*

One of the first published studies in the area of online support was written in 1997 by Salem, Bogat, and Reid. The authors suggest that online support groups meet the needs of individuals who are unable to participate in face-to-face groups. They go on to suggest that online groups may be best understood as mutual-help groups, where members provide ongoing peer-based support for each other. Madara (1999) suggests that these early online support groups are similar to telephone distress lines as they are the next natural step in using technology to facilitate communication and therapy.

Madara (1999) described the possible therapeutic aspects of these early support groups by saying that they provided social support, sharing of practical

information, shared experience, positive role modeling, helper-therapy, empowerment, professional support, advocacy, and accessibility. Hillis and Lefebvre (1994) suggest that Internet-based support may be particularly useful in offering adolescents relief from isolation, a source of practical information for coping, positive role models, empowerment, and access to professional support when needed. Many of the benefits of online support groups have been supported by more recent studies, including sharing stories, social/emotional support, empowerment, and seeking advice (Alexander, Peterson, & Hollingshead, 2003; Wright & Bell, 2003). It seems clear that a number of aspects of Internet-based social support are uniquely able to meet the needs of specific groups. In a meta-analysis, Eyesenbach, Powel, Englesakis, Rizo, and Stern (2004) concluded that despite the number of peer-based social support sites available online, most studies have looked at the types of online support most appropriate for specific populations. Understanding the type of groups that are successful online may help inform an understanding of the potential of Internet-based social support (Finn & Lavitt, 1994).

### *Online Social Support Programs*

King and Moreggi (1998) suggest that members of all self-help and mutual aid organizations participate with the expectation of receiving emotional support, sharing personal experiences, and finding new ways to help themselves cope. This is similar in online and offline social support groups. Salem, Bogat, and Reid (1997) suggest that online support groups can be very similar to face-to-face groups because they are high in levels of support, acceptance, and positive

feelings, although they do engage in more emotional support and self-disclosure. These researchers also discuss the similarities and differences between online mutual help programs and face-to-face programs, suggesting that participants show more emotional support and self-disclosure online than offline. Eaglesham (1996) also suggests that participants in an online self-help group reported similar benefits to those in a face-to-face group.

Recent studies have been written about the development, structure, and outcome of Internet-based support groups for a number of specific groups. Although the structure and theoretical underpinnings often differ, what the groups have in common is that they utilize Internet-based communication for social support. King (1995) reports a significant correlation between number of hours spent utilizing online support resources and reported recovery from alcohol addiction. In fact, the researcher suggested that part of the effect was related to social learning and encouragement from the others in the program via online discussions. Similar results have been reported for obsessive compulsive disorder (Stein, 1997), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (Alexander, et al., 2003), cancer (Alexander, et al., 2003), diabetes (Barerra, et al., 2002), physical disabilities (Tichon & Shapiro, 2003), single mothers (Dunham, et al., 1998), sexual abuse (Lavitt, 1994), and depression (Muncer, Burrows, Pleace, Loader, & Nettleton, 2000; Salem & Bogat, 1997; 2000). One study by Alexander, et al. (2003) found that the different goals of online support groups accounted for most of the differences in the type of social support provided by the members.

Just as Internet-based communication influences the types of relationships

formed online, Internet-based support groups restrict and allow for different aspects of the experience of social support. For example, the accessibility of the Internet allows individuals to access support when they otherwise might not have. Anonymity allows for a sense of security, and using the written word may allow for a depth of communication that is more difficult with verbal language (Eaglesham, 1996). The differences allow for specific benefits that are important to individuals who have specific support needs that require the access, anonymity, or social distance that is afforded by the Internet. The authors often noted aspects of the Internet that were especially important to the members' sense of safety. For example, Lavitt (1994) noted that sexual abuse survivors valued having access to the group even after moving to a different part of the country. Salem and Bogat (2000) found there was less of a tendency for professionals to dominate the group for depression when it was held online. No research has been published describing how adolescents may use an online message board to discuss experiences related to suicide.

### *Summary of Internet-based Social Support*

The popularity of Internet-based social support reflects its potential as adjunct to current therapeutic practices. Salem and Bogat (2000) suggest that Internet-based support can be best conceptualized as another treatment method that fills some of the gaps of offline therapy, including issues about confidentiality, convenience, and access (Salem & Bogat, 2000; Walther & Boyd, 2002), but should not replace face-to-face therapy (King & Moreggi, 1998). Many authors agree that careful thought must be put into how Internet-based services

are integrated into therapeutic practices (Tate & Zabinski, 2004) and that more research is needed to maintain quality control and assess the outcome of Internet-based services. It seems clear that people are using the Internet to seek help when they are not comfortable using more traditional methods. Despite the popularity and potential of the internet, research in this area is only beginning to provide a practical basis for understanding how Internet-based support is being used.

## Review of Internet Support for Suicidal Adolescents

Synthesizing the literature on Internet-based support and adolescent suicidality reveals an outline for an Internet-based suicide prevention service. The process of suicide begins with feelings of despair and isolation. Many adolescents experience these feelings to different extents as part of adolescent development; however, sometimes these feelings progress to thoughts about suicide and acts of self harm. Many modern adolescents feel more at ease with seeking information and help on the Internet because the Internet offers social distance, anonymity, control, and high accessibility. The Internet may also facilitate relationships that decrease feelings of loneliness and facilitate a stronger social support network. Internet-based social support has the potential to be not only an important resource for suicidal adolescents, but may also augment current therapeutic practice by providing highly accessible social support alternatives.

## Rationale for the Study

Recent literature has helped to expand our understanding of suicidality in adolescence and how the Internet may be a valuable social support resource. Although the studies that are presently available help to define adolescent suicide

as a major problem, they tend to provide numerical descriptions, leaving out the stories that describe the experiences of the participants. Similarly, studies on Internet-based social support have not focused on the narrative descriptions and themes of those who seek help online.

Finally, the literature seems to combine to present a clear potential for an Internet-based suicide prevention service for adolescents. Because there are presently no studies that describe such a service, this study provides a description of a message board where adolescents discussed their suicidal thoughts and feelings, and received support from others in the online community. By using a qualitative methodology, the results of the study provide a description of the participants experiences of being suicidal, as well as the process of seeking, receiving, and providing social support online

## Research Questions

The following questions will be answered in this study:

1. Questions about suicide
    a. What emotions do authors report as central to their experiences of psychological pain and thoughts of suicide?
    b. What developmental issues play a role in adolescents' suicidal processes?
    c. What is the role of interpersonal relationships (peer/parent/romantic) in the participants' suicidal processes?
    d. Do the participants' reports support a conceptualization of suicide as a process?

2. Questions about online loneliness and support seeking
    a. How do the participants report their experiences of loneliness?
    b. Do the participants report feeling safe online?
        i. What do they seem to attribute this feeling of safety to?
        ii. How do aspects of Internet-based communication affect this?
    c. How does the written nature of Internet-based communication influence self-expression and support seeking?
    d. What behaviours do participants report as part of seeking help online?
3. Questions about supportive behaviour online
    a. How do participants develop relationships online?
    b. What types of support do others online offer?
    c. What differences exist between the support offered by the trained volunteers and the supportive peers online?
    d. What is the role of community in providing support?
4. Follow-up questions
    a. What are the implications of this research on our understanding of suicidal experiences?
    b. What are the implications of this understanding for planning suicide prevention strategies?
    c. What are areas of future research?

# CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

## Rationale for Research Method: Modified Content Analysis

Although it is difficult to truly understand what life is like for another person, the picture is likely to be more accurate if an investigation is based on the participant's own descriptions. A qualitative method allows for understanding aspects of the process and experience because the focus is on understanding what the experience means to the participant, what their lives are like, and what is happening for them (Merriam, 2002). Since the purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of the members of an online community, the form of analysis chosen focused on the experiences of the individuals represented in the content of the text generated by the online community. A study like this has not been completed before; therefore quantitative analysis is not appropriate because any attempt to pre-categorize the experiences of the participants may arbitrarily limit the scope of understanding.

Some studies of Internet-based social support have used quantitative methods to summarize content from computer-mediated communication (Muncer, et al., 2000), but many of the experiences of the individuals have been lost in the analysis. De Souza and Preece (2004) suggested a method for analyzing the structure of an online community through describing a community framework and testing the accuracy of the model. Although the results provided a fascinating context for individual experiences online, the individual voices were muted in the description of the community. Many other methods suggested by December (1996), also did not allow for the preservation of the individual voices of

community members.

Qualitative research methods differ from each other in their emphases on theoretical and applied aspects of the research method, but they commonly emphasize the importance of human experience. The type of qualitative analysis used is determined by the goals of the study and method of data collection. Whereas most qualitative methods involve interviewing participants and asking about their experiences, in this study the online messages written by the participants were available for examination. Therefore, the method of qualitative inquiry was based on content analysis (Cavanagh, 1997), and was modified to answer the specific questions of the study. Content analysis is a form of basic interpretation and description of data using previously collected documentation (Merriam, 2002), which emphasizes discovery rather than control.

Ryan and Bernard (2003) suggest that free-flowing texts, like those used in the present study, may be coded into themes by examining words in context, counting words, or by examining chunks of text. After themes have been identified, text units are typically coded into the theme categories, which are then counted and described in terms of the number of text units in each thematic category. Coding is the process whereby judgments are made about the meanings of contiguous blocks of text in order to help meet the goals of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Downe-Wamboldt (1992) further stated that the category schemes are described by the researcher to generate knowledge and to increase understanding of a particular phenomenon. In this study, category schemes were chosen that seemed to clarify common experiences for the participants.

The main goal of content analysis is to identify core themes using previously existing text. Different researchers have met this goal in different ways (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Hickey & Kipping, 1996). Although this often includes counting the units in each category for comparison using computer programs, Cavanagh (1997) stated that "there are no universal rules about how to use content analysis," (p. 6) and Hickey and Kipping (1996) suggest, "the purpose of content analysis will influence the procedures involved and will vary between researchers and goals" (p. 82). Although December (1996) suggested that content analysis is the most appropriate research method for computer-mediated communication, Kleinman (2002) modified content analysis to meet the needs of his study to identify patterns and conventions in online message postings that had been archived.

## Modified Content Analysis in this Study

The methodology in the present study may be conceptualized as the initial stages of classical content analysis research methodology: the identification and description of content themes. The quantitative aspect of content analysis (counting categorized text units) was not necessary to meet the goals of this study and therefore was not utilized. The literature on qualitative analysis theory (in general) and content analysis (in particular) has informed the choice of analysis for this study. Non-solicited text comprised the data set and thematic categories were generated based on a reading of the data. The themes were then used to paint a general picture of the experiences of the participants, rather than being used to code text units. In this way, classical content analysis methodology was modified

to best meet the specific goals of this study.

To understand the participant's experience of seeking help, it was best to use data that were collected throughout the seeking process. This was accomplished by collecting the original archives of the online communications. The Internet is a unique forum for this type of research because the original content of the discussions are preserved as a continual record that is available for later reference. Using the original texts had the added benefit of tracking participants through their experience, and revealed a perspective that may be lost if the participants were asked to tell their stories in retrospect.

## Procedure

A community agency designed a webpage and message board to target adolescents and encourage them to write about their experiences and feelings on various topics including the topic of suicide. Trained peer support volunteers offered resources, support, and modeled supportive behaviour on the messages boards. Participant messages were kept online for several months. For the purpose of this study, the online transcripts were collected with the assistance of the website staff. Text was copied directly from the website, stripped of all identifying information, and transferred into a text reading software program by the program director as part of the routine archiving of the data.

Because of the nature of the Internet, masking the identities of the participants may not be sufficient to maintain anonymity. Although the data were created independently of the study many months before it began, text that is published on the Internet is very difficult to control. If direct quotations were used

in this study, records possibly remaining on the Internet that could be traced to the original participant's posting. For this reason, the reports used in the present study are paraphrases of the original quotations (Sixsmith & Murray, 2001). Due to the nature of Internet search tools, paraphrased quotations are unlikely to be linked to the original message. Finally, to maintain anonymity, all headers, signatures, and references to any person's name or pseudonym were removed and no specific reference was made to the location or forum studied.

Once collected, the transcripts were converted to a basic text format to remove unnecessary formatting that may have distracted from the content of the messages. They were then printed, sorted by date, and then cross-referenced to the original transcripts to ensure the completeness of the data set. All of the messages were read for preliminary screening, and the 10 longest threads were selected for a more in-depth analysis. The text represented in these threads was analyzed using content-based analysis to reveal the process of support seeking behaviour online.

As recommended by McLeod (1999), the following steps were taken in the process of analysis. In the initial stages of analysis, each thread was read as a stand-alone unit to maintain the sense of interaction in the messages. Notes were taken throughout the reading to summarize identified themes. At this stage in the analysis it was important to generate summaries to identify the patterns in the participants' interactions over time. Notes were made to summarize the messages in order to review the entire conversation on a single page. These summaries were used to identify patterns in the process of the interactions.

In the second stage of analysis, themes were identified based on the notes

taken from the original reading, and a subsequent reading of the data corroborated the identification of themes. Themes were designated as important if they occurred in a number of threads. Single statements that seemed to exemplify a participant's experience were also noted for inclusion as an example within a theme. Reports of experiences that seemed to be particularly poignant were also noted for inclusion in the results. Themes were then labeled based on the nature of their content. Specific examples of each theme were sought and paraphrased in a separate document. Themes were then elucidated using the constant comparative method, which facilitated the description of themes and sub-themes.

A journal of emerging insights and thoughts was kept throughout the process of data collection and analysis. This facilitated the collection and refinement of themes and interpretations of the meaning of various text units. Special attention was given to smaller units of meaning in accordance with McLeod's (2001) suggestion that "one of the characteristics of good qualitative research is the capacity to give very close attention to the meaning of short segments of text, sometimes even individual words or short phrases" (p. 129). Because the main focus of the study was on the participants' perception of the help-seeking process, poignant statements, phrases, or words were often quoted in the ongoing journal to reveal the voice of the participant as closely as possible. Although there is a level of interpretation in every aspect of the analysis, the primary goal of the study is descriptive. Therefore the themes highlighted in this study aim to describe salient aspects of the participants' experience of the process.

## Sampling

Message board transcripts were collected between the months of September and December, 2003. The threads that were chosen for inclusion in the study were the 10 longest threads that were produced during that time period. Although the messages in this time frame included far more unique conversations (threads) than were analyzed in this study, those included were chosen because they provided the most insight into the process over time.

The sample selection was purposive (Merriam, 2002), based upon the longest threads. The sample chosen was not meant to be representative of the population in general, but to contribute to an understanding of the unique experiences of those involved in the study. Demographic information is not available on the participants in the study. It is believed that most members of the online community are in the adolescent developmental stage because the site is targeted to this group of people. Furthermore, although the participants were not asked to report their ages, some reported their ages as part of the conversation. Of those who reported their ages, all were between the ages of 12 and 19. The participants in this study were both proficient in using the Internet and were dealing with issues related to suicide. Although focusing the target population to these individuals limited the scope of the study, it also allowed for a deeper understanding of the experiences of this specific population.

The criterion for inclusion in the study were: (1) participation in the online message boards during the time period under study (2) participants did not delete their posts after writing them and (3) posts were made over an extended period of time. Although these factors limit the data, they also provide opportunity to

understand those included in the study more thoroughly than if more participants had been included.

## Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are rather different concepts in qualitative research than in quantitative research (Merriam, 2002). Despite the differences, there is a scientific standard to be upheld through demonstrating reliability and validity of the classification system and interpretations in qualitative studies (Cavanagh, 1997).

In classic content analysis, researchers quantify textual data and rely on very specific definitions of categories. Because the data have been quantified, reliability relates to inter-rater reliability and stability over time (Cavanagh, 1997), and validity relates to comparing the coded categories to the original text (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). This study is a preliminary description of the themes in the text, and no comparisons will be made between the categories, therefore no quantification of the data is necessary. Reliability may be understood as the fit between the recorded data and what actually occurs in the behaviours being studied. In this study, the participants wrote messages to each other via the Internet. The data for this study is a direct record of those interactions and therefore is certainly an accurate representation of the interactions. After themes had been identified, accuracy was achieved by comparing the themes back to the original text to assess the "fit."

One concept used to establish validity and reliability in this study is trustworthiness (Golafshani, 2003). According to McLeod (2001), a study is

considered trustworthy if the methodology is sound and has been conducted with integrity. Merriam (2002) suggests that providing an audit trail enhances reliability of qualitative methodology. Finally, Downe-Wamboldt (1992) suggests that "multiple meanings are always present in data – there is no right meaning, only the most accurate meaning from a particular perspective" (p. 319). In this way, the validity of the data is relative to the researcher and the individual reading the study.

## Ethical Considerations

Literature on the ethical considerations for Internet-based research highlights conscientious examination of ethical issues and specific details of the study methodology. There are many types of research using the Internet, and whether a particular ethical consideration is relevant depends on the specifics of a study. A number of articles suggest guidelines for planning and evaluating research using Internet-based data. These articles have been reviewed and ethical considerations relevant to this study are discussed. Many of the considerations have been influenced by King's (1995) standard setting article.

The Internet is a very new, but fruitful, source of potential data for the study of human behaviour. Because online interaction is easily recorded, it provides a vast potential data set for gaining a deeper understanding of social interaction, personal experience, and online communication. Most of the data are available to anyone who has access to the Internet. Although it may seem intuitive that individuals who posts on a public site also gives their consent for anyone to read what they have read, the individual may not consider that what they write

may be studied in detail by researchers. Although the benefits in terms of access and quantity of this type of data seems apparent from the point of view of researchers, the dignity of the individuals involved in the study must be considered.

The issue of whether the Internet is private or public domain is widely debated in the literature and central to an ethical consideration of observational online research (Frankel & Siang, 1999). Although there is no consensus on whether Internet-based data is public or private, Kraut, et al. (2004) suggests that online discussions are exempt from "human-subject regulations" (e.g. informed consent) if the data is public and records existed prior to the beginning of research. Based on this rationale, Kraut, et al. (2004) suggest that observational research methodologies can be applied to online data, with reasonable modifications made to assure that the dignity of the participants is respected.

The data in this study were publicly posted on the Internet on a site that was registered in all major Internet search engines and was available to anyone who was online. It was not collected through intervention or interaction with the participants, and the records were complete archives prior to the beginning of research. No membership was required to read or post on the message board, and no restrictions were present that would discourage anyone who had Internet access from participating. Because there was no requirement for membership on the site, the data are neither identifiable nor private. Some members frequently joined and left the online community while others consistently participated, indicating that members likely understood that anonymous members often read

their messages. The presence of lurkers (participants who only read the messages, but do not post) was not visible on the site; however, users who did not identify themselves made anonymous posts. These anonymous participants also may have served as a reminder that members other than the regular participants read the messages. There were no explicit policies regarding privacy posted on the site. Due to the nature of messages being posted on a website, the participants undoubtedly understood that their messages were being archived on the site.

This research project was designed and completed in accordance with the standards of the University of Alberta. A detailed proposal was submitted to the Faculties of Education and Extension Research Ethics Board to obtain approval for the proposed research procedures. Approval was also obtained through the agency that supports the online community studied in this project.

# CHAPTER FOUR: PARTICIPANTS

Although there was variability between the recorded experiences of each of the participants in the community, there emerged a number of similarities that allowed for an understanding of common feelings, issues, and sense of community. Several of the participants wrote messages telling the community how they felt at the time of the message. As the messages were written over three months, the reported feelings changed over time. The type of feelings and issues reported and the pattern of change over time both reflected important aspects of the experience of being suicidal and seeking help. Specific themes emerged that seemed to be important in determining the participants' experiences including feelings and thoughts about suicide and seeking help. Finally, the theme of community was represented both in the structure of the text and the content of the messages posted between individuals. Although the experiences of the participants are summarized into themes, all of the themes are inter-related concepts that were experienced by many of the community members.

## Description of the Message Board

On the website, each message board is entitled with the theme of the messages. The theme of the message board in this study was "Suicide." Within the message board, there were distinct conversations (threads), which were all related to suicide in some way. The members can be categorized into three groups: authors (participants who began and were generally the focus of the thread), the volunteer support members who wrote under the username "The trained volunteers," and the rest of the online community participants.

Each thread had a single author who created the thread, posted the first message, and was seeking help for a topic related to suicide. Another community member responded to the first message and either the author or other members would continue the discussion, focusing on the issues that the author presented. Which community member responded first depended upon the risk level of the message content and who read the message first. Most of the community members authored a number of threads themselves and posted within the threads authored by other members, occasionally referring to the content of other threads.

## Setting the Culture

Although no "rules" were stated about using the message boards, it was clearly stated on this site that the intent of the message boards was to provide a place for people to express life concerns, receive support, and help themselves. The webpage stated that trained volunteers checked the messages at least once per day.

Because there was no practical limit to the number of members who could post in a thread the trained volunteers limited the conversation threads to focus on a single individual so that the message board would not be overwhelmed with posts on various topics. Three main standards were expressed: limiting the focus of a single thread to the personal concerns of a single author, protecting members from messages that were clearly abusive, and removing any identifying information about community members. These standards were maintained by clearly restating them when community members violated them and occasionally by editing a message that was in violation.

One example of how focus was maintained within a single thread began with an author writing a message expressing feelings of depression about the breakdown of a close relationship and another member who responded by stating that she was having a very similar experience and wrote a message about her story as well. In this case, if the second message was kept within the same thread as the first, then the community may be unclear about how to write messages in the same thread to support two different people. To help reduce the confusion, the trained volunteers created a new thread and moved the second message to the new thread. A message was left in the first thread stating that the second message had been moved to provide the best support possible to both authors. Whenever the trained volunteers took administrative action, a message was left explaining why it was done. Over time, the community members learned these standards and corrected themselves and each other in the same supportive tone as the trained volunteers.

The trained volunteers also worked to establish a culture of safety by reviewing the messages daily and editing personal content. Whenever personal information was removed from a message, another was posted to replace it that stated that the personal information was removed because it could be misused on the Internet. Another way that the trained volunteers maintained safety in the community was by deleting messages that were clearly abusive and replaced them with messages that reminded the community members that the messages board are meant to be a safe and supportive environment. These messages were often followed by messages from other community members expressing their disgust

with those who posted the initial abusive message.

Although the trained volunteers occasionally edited messages to maintain the standard of safety, there were times when comments did not seem abusive, but may have been interpreted as critical or even distasteful. In these cases, the trained volunteers often left the comments on the messages board for the community to respond to. Most often, supportive community members tactfully reprimanded one member in the defense of another member. The trained volunteers encouraged this process so that community members felt as though they were free to speak their minds without being indiscriminately edited by the trained volunteers; it also facilitated the process of community building by allowing members to defend and be defended by other members.

## Description of the Threads

Ten threads were identified for in-depth examination. This section will briefly describe these conversations.

### *Thread 1 (25 posts)*

This thread included 4 participants: the author "Angel", the trained volunteers, and "Sam" a frequent community member and one other member. Angel told her story about feeling depressed and suicidal and asked specific questions about how to get help. The trained volunteers responded with empathy, emotional support, specific suggestions, and encouraged character strength. Sam encouraged Angel by saying that she is strong and encouraged her to continue to write on the message board.

*Thread 2 (75 posts)*

In this thread, the author "Abe" told his story about feeling lonely, depressed, and suicidal. Abe disclosed his difficulty with social anxiety and reported that he had talked to his family about these experiences. He reported that he sometimes harmed himself by cutting his body in response to his negative thoughts and feelings. The trained volunteers responded with empathy, validation, and normalization. They encouraged Abe to talk to family and friends, and to focus on the future by taking small steps. Sam participated in this thread with similar statements of empathy as the trained volunteers, often stating "We're here for you" and encouraged Abe to "Keep posting." Four other community members posted single messages to support and encourage Abe.

*Thread 3 (54 posts)*

In this thread, the author "Kayle" wrote about her boyfriend who was suicidal, the breakup of her relationship with him, and of being afraid of the future. The trained volunteers offered the usual support, encouraged her to spend time taking care of herself, and assured her that the situation was not her fault. Sam offered empathy, said that Kayle had the character strength to make it through, encouraged Kayle to be hopeful, and assured her that "things will be ok." Two other community members offered empathy, hope, and encouraged Kayle to "do the right thing" by taking care of herself.

*Thread 4 (94 posts)*

The author, "Christine" expressed feelings of pain, hopelessness, and the plan to kill herself. She wrote about the problems she was having with her

boyfriend, school, and abuse. Christine was very descriptive of her feelings. Sam was supportive and offered some specific advice. "Ollie," a community member and Christine's boyfriend was told that Christine was posting on the site and joined the community. Ollie shared his experiences in helping Christine deal with her feelings of depression and despair. Ollie expressed support, love, criticism, feelings of frustration, and encouragement. "Erin," an active community member, offered to help Christine through personal communication that was discouraged by the trained volunteers. Five other community members offered supportive comments, challenging comments, and told personal stories at various points.

*Thread 5 (21 posts)*

The author, "Annie" told her story of trying to raise her children while their father, her boyfriend, was suicidal and had planned a date to kill himself. Annie also reported feeling distressed, depressed, in despair, guilty, confused, and having suicidal ideation. The trained volunteers responded regularly and offered the same type of support as usual, but also gave Annie the times when she could contact the online crisis chat. Sam gave his usual support and specifically suggested that Annie get a counsellor. Four other members offered empathy, advice, and said that it wasn't Annie's fault that her boyfriend was suicidal.

*Thread 6 (27 posts)*

The author, "Jill" expressed feeling lonely and wishing that she had a boyfriend. She also wrote about her experiences with someone who was bullying her at school. The trained volunteers offered empathy, validation, normalization, some support resources, and encouragement. Kayle (author of thread 4) offered

empathy, encouragement, and told her not to give up. Sam offered similar support and encouraged Jill to keep posting. Another community member asked Jill what other resources she thought might be helpful for her.

*Thread 7 (45 posts)*

The author, "Lois" told the story of having "no friends," panic attacks, relationship difficulty with her parents, suicide plan, self harm (cutting) behaviour, feelings of stress about Christmas and going to a new school, and her grandmother being sick. The trained volunteers offered support, explored the risk for suicide, gave information on local crisis centers, and encouraged Lois to read the threads of others who were having similar experiences. Sam also participated in this thread and offered empathy, encouragement that Lois is "strong enough" to get through this, coping strategies, attempted to contract with Lois not to kill herself, and encouraged her to seek help offline as well.

*Thread 8 (42 posts)*

This thread included 42 posts, 12 of which were posted by the author, "Daniel." Daniel appeared to be a very intelligent individual who asked the existential question: "what is the meaning of life?" Daniel reported that he often cut himself, was on medication for depression, and was planning suicide. Daniel reported that he felt no pain, but felt "just numb." Daniel indicated that the reasons that he had not followed through with his suicide plans were because he did not want to hurt his family and friends. The trained volunteers responded with many of the responses as usual, but also responded with messages that were somewhat more philosophical because the author seemed to wish to primarily

discuss his experience on an intellectual level. Specifically, the trained volunteers asked Daniel what life would be like if there was a "miracle" and life was suddenly perfect. They also asked Daniel what he thought the future may hold. Sam also posted in this thread and responded with empathy, encouragement to write more messages, encouragement to talk to family members and a mental health professional, and reassurance that the community was there for support. Four other members posted to encourage Daniel. One of these members stated that they disagreed with Daniel's "logical" conclusion that life has no meaning.

*Thread 9 (30 posts)*

This thread included 30 messages, 14 from the author, "Lynn." Lynn reported that she had posted on the site before and it had helped, but she was feeling worse again. She reported having difficulties in school and feeling very anxious about exams. She reported feeling suicidal, depressed, and that she sometimes took medication. From her posts, Lynn appeared highly anxious and expressed the desire to get away from her problems. Lynn stated that she was familiar with all of the things that the trained volunteers were "supposed" to say, and had heard it all before. The trained volunteers responded by asking Lynn what she would like the trained volunteers to ask her, also offering normalizing and validating statements. Despite Lynn's comment about her familiarity with the trained volunteers' "lines," the trained volunteers offered many of their conventional responses, prompts, and encouraging statements. Sam posted and expressed the hope that she would change her mind and not kill herself. Sam offered generally supportive statements. Three other members of the community

posted to support Lynn, including Daniel, the author of thread 8.

*Thread 10 (49 posts)*

This thread included 49 messages, 15 of them from "Megan," the author. Megan generally posted very short messages expressing very hopeless content, saying, "There is no point" and frequently prompted someone to respond to her messages, asking questions such as "is there anyone there?" Megan reported cutting her arms, feeling guilt and loss, and having academic difficulties. Megan also reported finding it much easier to express herself with writing than talking and included poetry in her messages as well as an unsent letter to a family member. The trained volunteers posted many of the same type of supportive messages as in other threads, specifically suggesting using an elastic band to snap instead of cutting as well as writing a letter to a relative to help express previously unexpressed feelings. Sam encouraged the strategies suggested by the trained volunteers. Four other community members posted in support, including one member who posted 18 supportive messages. This member, "Erin" offered empathy, validating and normalizing statements, encouragement to talk more about thoughts, feelings, and experiences, statements such as "you are a strong person," and a number of rather long posts that offered seemingly well thought out advice.

## Description of the Participants

Three types of community members were identified: authors, the trained volunteers, and other community members. There were 10 authors who participated in the 10 threads discussed in this study. Each author began the thread

by posting a message expressing personal distress that was often related to suicidal feelings or concern that someone close to them was suicidal. After being encouraged to continue telling their story, an author would often describe specific stressors in their lives and details of how they were feeling and behaving in response to those stressors. The authors continued to post their experiences and were always responded to supportively by other members in the community.

It is generally unclear why the authors stopped posting when they did. In thread 9, Lynn stated that she had stopped posting in a previous thread because she felt better, but now felt as though she needed support again. Just as some of the authors reported having had created threads before those used in this study, it is likely that they had created other threads after data collection for the study ended. The threads may be most appropriately conceptualized as conversations that occurred over many months and included a number of breaks. Because the data were collected at one point in time, it is likely that messages were posted in some of the threads after they were collected for this study; the conversation may simply be incomplete.

The second group of community members were those who posted as the group name "the trained volunteers." These individuals were trained in telephone and Internet-based crisis intervention and also had experience volunteering on a local telephone crisis center. When the volunteers wrote messages as "the trained volunteers," they responded according to the standards outlined in the crisis management training that they received. Responses were genuine, empathic, non-judgmental, and empowering. The third group included all of the members who

were not trained volunteers. Most of the members wrote messages seeking help for themselves in some conversations and wrote messages to support other members in other conversations; therefore the distinction between author and "other" member can only be made in the context of an individual thread. There seemed to be a general pattern of entering the community to seek support, gaining support from the trained volunteers and other members, and then remaining part of the community in order to provide support for others as well as seek support again for themselves when needed.

## Key Members of the Community

Five community members, not including the trained volunteers, were involved in more than one of the threads. Two of these members, Sam and "Michelle," did not author any of the threads. Three of the members, Kayle, Christine, and Daniel, were authors of threads as well as supportive community members in other threads. Involvement in more than one type of role in the community supported the identification of these members as key in the community.

### *Sam*

Sam was involved in all of the threads as a supportive community member and did not post as an author during this study. In many ways Sam's messages resembled the trained volunteers' posts. In fact, the trained volunteers and Sam both often stated that they agreed with the other, or encouraged the author to follow-up on a question posed by the other. Depending upon the situation, Sam displayed empathy, normalizing statements, validating statements, encouraging

character statements (such as "you are a strong person"), statements encouraging the author to continue to post (e.g. "tell me more" and "keep posting"), statements of hope, "we're here for you," encouraging self care ("take care"), specific advice, and assurance that "everything will be ok." Two ways in which Sam's messages were different than the trained volunteers' were that Sam was more likely to give specific advice such as "you should talk to your brother" and more likely to make statements of assurance such as "things will be ok."

Sam was often the first person to respond to a post and occasionally apologized to authors for not being able to post sooner. In fact, Sam often posted before the trained volunteers was able to read an authors message. This may indicate that Sam monitored the site several times a day and felt a deep responsibility for, and connection to, the other members of the site.

*Michelle*

Michelle participated in almost every thread. However, unlike Sam, Michelle generally posted less than 5 messages in a thread and offered more specific and concise feedback. Michelle often made encouraging statements like "you can get through this," offered specific advice, encouraged the author to find supportive resources in the community, said "we're here for you," and encouraged the author to keep posting.

*Kayle*

Kayle was the author of thread 2 and offered support to Annie in thread 5. In the second thread, Kayle stated that her boyfriend suffers from a mental illness and has a planned suicide date. She stated that she loved him very much and

desired to get help for him any way that she could. She suggested that he may have made a plan to die before school started because he was afraid of the future. Kayle later reported that she sought help from family members who got her boyfriend into a new therapy, but that her boyfriend was very upset with her for interfering. Kayle said that she told her boyfriend's friend's who consulted a counsellor to find out how to help him. She wrote about some of the things that she did to try to help her boyfriend, including researching suicide and depression and trying to be supportive by talking to him. She expressed intense feelings of distress at the thought of losing her relationship with him. Kayle reported she was very committed to the relationship and asked for specific advice on what she could do to make it work. She also asked for specific advice about what to do about her friends who thought that she should break up with him.

When her boyfriend seemed to be doing better, she continued to post every few days to keep the community up to date on what was happening with her. She tended to post more often when she felt more distressed. She frequently repeated that she felt scared, so full of worry that she felt lifeless and old, and often slept through classes. She reported sometimes breaking down in public, snapping at her friends, but later reported feeling more calm. She started going to church to take care of herself. Kayle expressed thanks to the other members for their support.

### *Christine*

Christine was the author of thread 3 and offered support to Jill in thread 6. In her first post she wrote her story about being depressed for a number of years,

cutting herself, and attempting suicide because of the psychological pain. Christine reported that she had been cutting for many years. She described the cycle of cutting, saying that when she cut herself, she felt worse and she would cut herself again because she felt guilty. Christine reported seeing a counsellor, but said that it didn't help. She reported that she broke up with her boyfriend recently and had attempted suicide. After her parents found her, she felt useless for failing in her attempt. She described in detail how cutting, feeling depressed, and feeling suicidal affected her everyday life. She stated that she had no friends and no one talked to her. She said that she wanted to talk to counsellors but when she was in the office, the feeling disappeared. She asked the community to tell her if she should be hospitalized. After being prompted, Christine told her story of attempting suicide and beginning to cut herself for the first time because a romantic relationship didn't work out. In later messages she reported having romantic feelings toward other girls and wondered if these may be part of her problem.

Over time, Christine wrote many messages updating the community on how she was feeling and reported events such as appointments with doctors and counsellors, conversations with friends, fights with her boyfriend, school, and things that she was trying to do to help herself. Christine often wrote about her boyfriend, who became one of the members of the community. Her boyfriend would post messages about what she was going through and also expressing his feelings of love, hope, frustration, and anger with Christine. At one point Christine asked him to stop posting because his messages made her "feel worse."

She told him to get his own thread if he wanted support for his "own stuff". Although he stopped posting for a while, he began writing messages again later in the thread. As events occurred and situations changed in her life, Christine reported her feelings changed dramatically and in cycles. Although much of the time she reported feeling very distressed, she also wrote of times when she felt very hopeful that things would be fine.

Through prompts from the other members, Christine identified a number of individuals in her life who she looked to for support and activities that she used to distract herself. She also identified the hope that someday she would be better, but the fear that she may never feel better. She described how she had attempted suicide in the past and why it didn't work. She also described a number of techniques (including snapping a rubber band on her wrist) to avoid cutting, but reported that none of them worked for her.

Christine wrote a lot about her feelings and described many of them in very articulate detail, often using metaphors and examples to illustrate her experiences. She wrote about feeling guilty that she was putting the people who she loved through her mood swings and self-destructive behaviour. She described feeling trapped, hopeless, and as though no one understood her feelings. She stated that if only someone understood, it would mean everything to her.

Christine often wrote messages that were 3-4 times the length of the messages in other threads. She also wrote very often, sometimes posting 2-3 messages in a single evening. She appeared to use posting on the website as a way to distract herself when she was particularly upset, and at one point she stated that

she would post more later because she didn't feel as though she was quite finished writing yet. Christine also appeared to look forward to the messages of other members of the community, at times thanking them for their responses and at other times writing short messages asking for anyone to respond so she would know that her messages were being read.

*Daniel*

Daniel was the author of thread 8 and offered support to Megan in thread 9. In his initial post Daniel suggested that there was no meaning to life and no reason to continue living, challenging the community to convince him that he was wrong. Daniel stated that he had concluded that suicide is the most logical option. Through his messages, Daniel described the many religious, scientific, and philosophical reasons why he had concluded that life has no meaning and should therefore end.

He also reported that he had been cutting himself for a while, that he had not found counselling helpful, and that antidepressant medication made him feel worse. Daniel stated that he had attempted suicide before, but stopped both times before the attempts became fatal. He reported that the reasons he has not completed suicide were because he did not want to ruin the holiday season and his friends would be very upset. When asked to describe his feelings, Daniel repeatedly stated that he did not generally experience intense emotion, but felt very numb. Daniel updated the community over time and reported cutting every few weeks, when he felt "down."

Upon repeated prompting, Daniel mentioned a number of things that he

enjoyed doing, but said that most of them just fill the time in his life. Daniel said that he felt that he could do anything with his life; he just had no motivation to do so. Daniel reported having various conversations with friends and updated the community on what he was thinking about his decision about the meaninglessness of life. Daniel reported that although he believed that his friends would get over his death, he was emotionally moved by their concern for him. In his final message Daniel reported that his plan to kill himself had been interrupted because a friend had "guilted" him into staying alive.

## CHAPTER FIVE: RESULTS

### General Themes

#### *Narrative descriptions of experiences*

All of the threads contained stories of the authors' experiences. Authors, such as Abe, often reported that they "just needed to vent" and found that writing their stories on the message board gave them the forum that they needed to express themselves. Some of the stories described traumatic events and included details of how they felt and thought and how their feelings changed over time. Other stories were short reports of events that had happened at school. Although the content of the stories varied widely, they were all told by individuals who were seeking help and were read by people who wanted to help.

#### *Community development*

Throughout the threads, the participants seemed to develop a sense of community with the other members. This sense of community became apparent through statements such as "we are here for you" and "tell us what is going on,"

indicating that a member felt a sense of camaraderie with the other members of the community. Specific comments such as "tell us what we can do to help" implied that the member offering support felt a sense of community with the other supporting members. At times, the trained volunteers referred to the entire community when posting messages to establish normative behaviour, such as "in order to keep this a safe place for everyone to talk about what is going on for them…" These references to group norms indicated that there was a sense of community through established culture that was often upheld by the members of the community.

Several members, such as Daniel and Christine, indicated interaction with other members by reading others' threads and often posting comments to offer advice and support. It was clear that members read more threads than they wrote messages in because members occasionally referred to messages in other threads. For example, in one thread, a member told the author that they believed the author was a "caring and loving" person because of the advice that the author had given another member of the online community.

A strong sense of community was indicated in several of the threads (such as thread 4) when members stated that they felt as though their experience was understood and shared by other members. This sense appeared to be especially strong for those members, such as Lois and Megan, who indicated that they could not share their experience with others in their lives, or Abe and Christine who reported feeling that others in their lives could not understand them. Abe also reported that he disliked the counsellor at school because it felt like venting to

someone who he didn't know. Community members reported that feeling "known" by others in the community facilitated feeling supported by them. Authors would often indicate that they were affected by the support of the other members by thanking them, or stating that they took the advice provided.

## Content Themes

All authors wrote about being distressed regarding some area of their life. Specific areas of concern varied between and within threads. Generally, authors were concerned about issues that reflected perceptions of themselves or interaction with others, although there was often considerable overlap.

### *Perceptions of Self*

#### *Self harm*

In five of the ten threads (threads 1,2,4,7,8), the authors reported engaging in self harm behaviours as one of their primary issues. Each reported that they had been engaging in self harm behaviours, such as cutting their arms or legs with sharp objects, for a number of months or years. Over time, authors reported trying to stop harming themselves, engaging in different self harm behaviours, or reported perceiving self harm differently. Two authors reported that their suicidal plans were related to self harm behaviour. Specifically, Daniel reported that he initially began cutting because he was trying to cut his wrists to kill himself, but he changed his mind. Another author reported that she thought about killing herself by cutting her wrists in the same way that she did to self harm, but with deeper, more serious cuts. For these authors, suicidal plans were related to their self harm behaviour. Other authors did not report that their self harm behaviour

was related to thoughts of suicide at all. In fact, some authors stated that they did not harm themselves with the intent to die, but rather because the behaviour helped them cope with mental pain. Abe reported cutting himself with a plastic card, saying that he believed that it was not as bad as using a razor because it didn't draw blood.

Christine and Abe both described the process of trying to stop cutting, trying less harmful behaviours, relapsing, and feeling very guilty and upset with themselves for not being able to stop. Abe reported having difficulty because it seemed to dull the mental pain that he was feeling. Each of the five authors reported feeling that they had limited control of themselves and felt that they "needed" to cut when they felt very distressed. Daniel and Angel both described their thoughts about cutting as almost obsessive behaviour, stating that they couldn't think of anything else. Lois stated that the only thing that helped her stop cutting was other kinds of self injury, stating "self injury is the only real way how I can cope with my feelings". Over time, Abe and Angel both wrote messages describing when they had been successful in not harming themselves, when they had harmed themselves, and when they decided to stop again.

Authors also reported feelings associated with their self harm behaviour. All of the authors reported harming themselves to help cope with feelings of intense distress. They all also reported some knowledge that the behaviour was not adaptive for the long term, but helped at the time. Abe reported feeling as though the benefits of cutting made it worth it because he was not drawing blood. However, he also reported feeling stupid and helpless because he was doing harm

to his own body. Lynn, Abe, and Angel reported that they were afraid of others seeing the scars on their bodies and making judgmental comments. Lois and Abe both reported wearing clothes to hide cuts and scars. Abe reported that it "felt good" when one of his friends noticed that he was hurting himself, but then felt stupid because he "wasn't doing it to be noticed, it just felt right." When asked, Abe reported that sometimes he didn't cut because there was someone else in the room with him.

Finally, some authors also often reported very practical concerns related to self harm behaviours. Abe also reported that he felt worried that others would ask him why he wore extra clothing when it was warm weather. Authors also expressed concern with having scars for a long time. Overall, several authors in the study reported a variety of experiences with self harm behaviour that included intense feelings, thoughts, consideration of social and practical implications, and change over time. Sometimes the behaviours appeared to be clearly related to suicidal behaviour, but other times they did not.

*Depression/Anxiety*

All of the authors reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety and/or depression. Some of the authors reported that they had been to see a counsellor who had suggested they had diagnoses such as Major Depressive Disorder, Manic Depressive Disorder (Kayle's boyfriend), Panic Attacks (Lois) Generalized Anxiety Disorder, and Social Anxiety (Abe). In their reports, some participants reported that they found it useful to know that their feelings were related to a diagnosable illness, whereas others reported that they did not feel any better after

"knowing what was wrong" with them.

It seemed as though participants had difficulty thinking about their depression/anxiety as existing within a framework in their lives. Participants seemed to focus on the immediate experiences of depression and anxiety such as specific thoughts, feelings, relationships, and behaviours. When writing about a session with a counsellor, participants tended to focus on their perceptions of whether the counsellor liked them or not, rather than the content of the sessions. Similarly, participants tended to focus on specific emotions and tended to attribute them to single causes (often interpersonal relationship difficulty), or expressed hopelessness because they could see no reason for their depression and/or anxiety.

Authors varied in the detail in which they described their feelings of depression and/or anxiety. Some authors were highly descriptive and articulate, often using metaphors and examples to describe their experience of their feelings. Other authors, like Christine, had more difficulty putting their feelings into words, but used lyrics from songs or intense, simple descriptions. Being encouraged to reflect on their feelings, some authors described in detail how they changed over time. Several times authors would describe cycles of feeling better or worse depending on variables including, situation, relationships, medication, weather, and time. Abe reported that he felt depressed before he dated his ex-girlfriend, but quite happy while they were together. Furthermore, he reported that after they broke up he felt worse than when he had been single the first time because he knew what he was "missing."

*Developmental issues*

All of the authors described experiences that they perceived to be related to the reasons for their distress and thoughts of suicide. Although it is impossible to determine the age of the participants, the experiences described by the authors suggest that most of them were of jr. high, high school and early university age. They also described experiencing issues that are characteristic of adolescence, including the search for personal purpose and identity formation.

*Finding purpose*. Several of the authors wrote about things in their lives that gave them a source of purpose and hope for the future. In several cases authors reported that close relationships provided the foundations for a sense of purpose and occasionally reported activities such as music, school, or work that helped them to view their lives as meaningful. Annie reported that her boyfriend made her feel that life was worth living. Megan reported that she thought that she would feel more "worthy" if she had a boyfriend.

Often, an author would identify the loss of a source of purpose as the cause of their desire to end their life. Most authors referred to romantic relationships of some type and reported that they felt as though they wouldn't know who they were outside of the relationship. Specifically, two threads were authored by females who were concerned about their boyfriends who were suicidal. Both of the authors expressed the sense that they would be "lost" if their boyfriend died. Abe reported that he felt that life had purpose when he had a girlfriend, but when he was rejected he felt that he had no purpose except for people to grieve if he died.

Other authors identified aspects of their lives that helped them to view their lives as meaningful and gave them hope for a future that was not full of pain. One example of this was Christine who reported that she felt hopeful about a new type of therapy that her boyfriend would be receiving. Abe reported that he looked forward to being more involved with a band that he had joined. Playing music gave him a feeling of belonging.

Often, a supportive member of the community attempted to draw an author's attention towards those aspects of life that gave them hope and a sense of meaning. When possible, community members would cite specific reasons to be hopeful based on the author's personal story. If the author had disagreed with these suggestions or simply denied any hope for their life, community members would often suggest that the author was "strong" for seeking help on the message board, or would make a statement of personal hope for the author such as: "I'm here for you and I believe that you can get through this." The discussion often cycled between the author expressing the loss of hope and the supportive members of the community who would suggest that there was still reason to be hopeful.

*Identity development*. Along with expressing the desire for meaning in life, all of the authors explored issues related to the development of their sense of personal identity. Authors asked questions: How do other people perceive me? What am I good at? Who will I become? Through conversation, members seemed to access a forum in which to explore their perceptions of him/herself. Authors reported exploring their identities through their experiences offline, by discussing and

receiving feedback from others in the online community about their offline experiences, and by experimenting with expressing themselves differently online than they would have offline.

Authors also told stories of exploring different aspects of their identity, including sexual identity and vocational identity. One author posted reporting difficulty in her relationship with her boyfriend and wondered if she might be bisexual. Two authors wrote about their sense of vocational identity. Specifically, Abe and Daniel wrote about their experiences at school and wondered if the grades they received indicated that they were more or less intelligent than others. Further they expressed concern that they may never be "successful" in life if they could not be "smart." These authors appeared to be exploring how to view themselves in terms of academics. Community members often reminded the authors of other important areas of life that are important to consider about one's self, such as personal character and integrity, relationships, and specific talents.

Jill began her first post by providing an assessment of her life with reference to a number of areas that defined her perception of herself. She stated having no boyfriend, no money, no friends, no job, and no one to talk to. She stated the desire to have someone to express her thoughts and feelings to, who would not judge her, or feel sorry for her. It seemed as though Jill was struggling with how others perceived her and highly valued the feedback that she received from the community members by expressing thanks to the community for not being judgmental and for offering support. Abe reported trying to "grow as a person" by talking more, but feeling frustrated when he was ignored by others in

his life.

It is also worth noting that the nature of the online message board lends itself to anonymous exploration of different personality characteristics. It would be impossible to determine the extent to which individuals' online personality resembled their offline personality, or how either of these constructs may resemble their "true" personality; however it is likely that the members expressed thoughts and feelings that they would not have expressed in their offline lives. One author specifically stated that she had never been able to talk to anyone in her life about her feelings and she as able to in the messages. This may represent an aspect of her sense of identity that she was able to explore online that she would not have been able to in her offline life. Abe described having social anxiety and reported that he felt much more comfortable talking about himself online than to others in his life. In this way the online forum may itself facilitate identity development in a unique way.

### *Interaction with Others*

Although relationships are commonly reported as an important factor influencing an individual's perceptions of him/herself, relationships also affected the authors directly by causing or ameliorating distress in their lives. These influences will be described in terms of family relationships, friendships/peer relationships, and romantic/intimate relationships.

#### *Family relationships*

Several authors wrote about difficulty with their immediate or extended families. Abe reported that his parents "aren't the easiest" people to talk to about

"serious" stuff. Megan stated that the primary source of her distress was the loss of her sister. Lois wrote a series of messages about her concern for her grandfather who was sick. A number of authors identified tense or destructive relationships with their parents as key factors in their distress. Authors often wrote messages immediately after having an argument with a family member and often reported that they were still feeling very upset at the time that they were writing. Angel described feeling angry and unloved after having an argument with her parents.

Although tense family relationships were commonly reported sources of distress, strong familial relationships were also reported as sources of strength. Supportive community members would often ask if an author's family is a source of support for them. A typical suggestion was one made by Sam who asked: "Would you feel comfortable talking to your parents? How about telling us about your relationship with them". Although some authors reported talking to their parents, several suggested that they did not think that their parents would be able to understand their experiences. Lois stated that her mom "says she knows what I am going through, but she doesn't."

A number of authors reported that they had tried to talk to a parent or family member and had been either helped or rejected in response. Abe specifically reported feeling that he could not talk to his parents about his depression or cutting himself. Angel said that she had told her parents about cutting and reported that her parents had indicated that they had "given up'' on her because they did not say anything in response. She felt that her parents

"seemed to hate me" and was afraid that they would put her in the hospital. In cases where the author felt rejected after reaching out to their parents for help, they also reported feeling worse than before they had disclosed.

*Peer relationships*

All of the authors wrote about how peers played a significant role in their experiences. One author reported that being with peers triggered panic attacks for him, which caused him anxiety and distress. Lois wrote in detail about how she was afraid of what her friends would say if they knew that she cut her arms. She hated how they said that she was a "cutter" and felt as though they won't give her a chance.

Relationships with peers were often cited as sources of both distress and/or strength. Often close peer relationships were written about as sources of strength when the author felt understood and accepted by others, but as sources of intense distress when the relationships were reported to be tense or broken. Cycles of feeling worse and better appeared to often be related to their relationships with their friends. Some authors reported feeling particularly distressed when they sought help from a friend and then felt rejected or betrayed by their response. Fights with friends at school were also reported to cause distress and thoughts of suicide. In fact, authors often told stories about incidents that occurred in their friendship groups. Community members offered feedback on how to respond to their friends. Authors tried the suggestions and updated the community on how their suggestions worked out. When Abe wrote about a fight with a friend, community members suggested that he talk to other friends, or seek out friends

who he felt comfortable talking to.

A number of authors told their offline friends about their thoughts of suicide with varying results and reported the conversation to the online community. At times the offline friends helped the author to get help, at times the friends had no reaction, and at times the friends initially offered support but became frustrated with the author over time. For example, Abe reported that he "tried hinting" to one of his friends about cutting himself because he really "needed to let it out", but his friend just "turned his shoulder" so Abe gave up talking to his friends. Lois reported that she told a friend when she attempted to overdoes on pain killers but said that the friend just told her to eat something. In another message, Lois reported that she told a friend about wanting to kill herself and the friend betrayed her trust by saying they would call Lois' parents. In other messages, the authors reported that their friends had convinced them to talk to their parents or seek help from a counsellor.

Members reported having very close relationships with some of their friends. One author reported that she wanted to get better for her friends because she loved them so much. Daniel poignantly stated that he had carefully thought out and planned to kill himself but that all that careful thought meant nothing when his friend was crying in his arms. In both of the threads where the author reported that their boyfriends were suicidal, the author also wrote about seeking help from the other friends of their boyfriend. From the stories told, it seems clear that offline friendships were essential and poignant aspects of their experiences. Furthermore, it seems as though these experiences were reported to be either very

positive and supportive, or the source of a lot of distress. Authors' opinions of individual friendships often changed over the course of a thread.

The significance of the friendships established online seemed to also be very important. In one thread, two of the members appeared to become very close and told each other that they valued each other's friendship. At times the authors wrote messages stating that they are writing because they had promised another community member that they would before hurting themselves. Megan stated a number of times that she appreciated all of the supportive comments from everyone on the message board.

*Romantic and intimate relationships*

Similar to relationships with peers, romantic relationships are often cited as both sources of strength as well as considerable distress. In several threads, authors reported that relationship breakups or denial of a desired romantic relationship was the primary source of distress leading to thoughts of suicide. As the conversations progressed, it became clear that there were a number of factors that contributed to the authors' histories with suicide and current thoughts of suicide. This is especially clear in thread 6 where Jill reported feeling very depressed and suicidal when a boy whom she liked rejected her attention. She also reported feeling happy and hopeful when he displayed interest in her.

Thread 4 was unique because Christine and her boyfriend both contributed to the conversation. She often wrote about how her boyfriend was supportive by talking to her and even physically restraining her from hurting herself; however, she also wrote about fights that she had and about feeling as though she had lost

all support when he was not emotionally supportive of her. Abe also reported feeling "so shy that (he) can't live anymore" after his girlfriend broke up with him. He also stated that the manipulation and tension in the relationship is "part of (his) depression." It seems that in some threads romantic relationships were sources of strong support for the individual who was in distress, whereas in other threads the romantic relationship was the cause of significant distress.

## Community Member Responses

### *The Trained Volunteers Responses*

Because the trained volunteers were all trained in the same program and worked together offline in the program that supported the website, they wrote messages that were generally similar to each other. Although there were variations in the length of the messages written by the trained volunteers, depending on what type of response appeared to be most appropriate, there were a number of consistent components.

#### *Empathy*

The general tone of the messages tended to convey the message that the feelings and experiences of the authors were understandable. Common statements included: "It sounds like you are experiencing a lot of pain right now" and "it isn't easy when things like that happen."

#### *Normalizing/Validating*

Common messages included statements that affirmed the author's experience and feelings in the context of their situation. Common statements included: "Anyone would feel hurt in your situation," "Your feelings are common

and make sense," "If you read some of the other threads, you may be surprised that several people have similar feelings," and "Often people feel afraid of the unknown."

*Empowering*

Almost every message written by the trained volunteers included a statement that suggested that the author was capable of making it through their experience. Often these took the form of an affirmation of some aspect of the author's character, such as: "You are a strong person, keep it up!" or "You are able to get through this."

*Resource Exploration*

The trained volunteers often encouraged the authors to list resources that were available to them. Prompts to explore resources that are based within the individual may include: "What things can you do to take care of yourself?" "What do you like to do to take your mind off of the pain?" and "What are some things that give you strength in your life?" Prompts to explore resources that are external to the individual often included encouragement to connect with trusted adults. Examples of such statements include: "Who do you feel you can trust to talk to about this?" "Could you talk to your parents?" "Have you talked to anyone about this?" "Do you think you could talk to a counsellor?" The trained volunteers also frequently suggested specific resources including local telephone distress lines or information on specific concerns such as anxiety, depression, and abuse.

*Risk assessment information*

The trained volunteers always asked for more information on specific

plans and means of an author who stated suicidal intention. They also often asked about previous suicidal behaviour and about feelings of ambivalence toward life. From the messages on the website, it is unclear whether the volunteers had the ability to follow-up with crisis intervention if the risk assessment indicated that intervention was necessary. No such intervention was reported in any of the messages in this study.

*"We care" and "Keep posting"*

Most messages by supportive members encouraged the author to keep writing on the message board by stating that the author was a valued member of the online community who cared about them.

*Other Member Responses*

Other community members were generally supportive in ways that were similar to the trained volunteers. However, because the other members were not trained and were not instructed to respond in any predetermined fashion, their responses were generally less consistent and also much more personal. At times the messages of the other community members contained all of the elements that were listed for the trained volunteers. The most common of these being empathy, empowering, and "We care"/"keep posting."

In addition to these, members often expressed emotional support by telling a story of how they had similar feelings at one time in their life. These types of responses are of particular interest when the community member was also the author of another thread. When Daniel posted in support of another author, he reported that he clearly didn't have all the answers, as one could read in his

thread, but that he hoped the author would find some in their life. Community members were also more likely to offer specific advice such as "You should go to the doctor," or imperative statements such as "Don't kill yourself" or "Stop hurting yourself, I care about you!" Specific advice was also often based on the member's personal story, such as "When I tried to kill myself, I later wished that I hadn't, so you shouldn't either."

### *The Process of Seeking Help*

Several of the authors reported having difficulty seeking help offline. Some authors wrote about their fear of reaching out to local counselling services and their hesitation to call local telephone distress lines. A number of authors specifically stated that they felt comfortable expressing themselves online because they perceived the online environment to be safe. Because of their hesitation to seek help offline, the online environment may have allowed the authors to reach out and receive the support needed to seek help in the offline world as well.

It is likely that several community members read messages on the website before posting. By reading about the experiences of others, these authors may have felt as though they had found a place where they may be understood and not judged for expressing their thoughts and feelings. It is impossible to know how long authors may have visited the site to read other member's messages before deciding to share their own story with the community. Authors may have written anonymous messages before becoming identifiable in the community by registering with a username. The nature of the online message board allowed individuals to assess the community in their own time and control the degree to

which they wished to participate. It is this control that may have given the participants a sense of safety that allowed them to seek help online.

The messages included in this study spanned several months and included several community members. From these messages, a number of observations about the process of seeking help online can be identified. Members represent various places in the process of seeking help through online messages. All of the authors wrote messages in an attempt to seek help in dealing with an issue of personal concern. The initial message was often the beginning of a process of seeking help from an online community. In response, the trained volunteers and the other members of the community would post messages in support of the author and the author would often respond with some combination of expressing further need for support and/or gratitude for support received. Over time the authors reported feeling better, worse, or reported having very different feelings than they had originally. Often the authors reported seeking help offline and wrote ongoing messages about how they felt about specific appointments and what they thought about talking to counsellors in general. At one point Lois asked the community if they thought that her counsellor would mind if she returned to counselling, saying "I know I don't want to die, its just so hard to get away from the thoughts let alone the actions." Although Lois did not write about whether she went to the counsellor or not, she continued posting messages for one week until the end of the thread. It cannot be said when the authors stopped posting because even if they stopped writing in one thread, they may have begun a new one at a later time or they may have continued to post in other members' threads.

As the community members responded to each other, the sense of community developed. Some of the authors in this study read and wrote supportive messages in threads other than their own. Because the messages in this study represent a small number of the available threads at the time, it is possible that the other authors also participated in other threads. In fact, several of the supportive members of the community were authors of threads that were not included in this study.

When authors wrote supportive messages to other authors, the messages tended to display several of the same types of supportive elements as were written to them. This pattern indicates a reciprocal process of changing roles from support seeker to support giver and back. One example of this is Christine who posted in Annie's thread saying, that she was going through the same type of thing and suggested that Annie contact Annie's boyfriend's therapist. The dynamic transition between help seeker and supporter is highlighted by Christine's comment that she did not really know how to be supportive in this kind of situation because she is having problems of her own.

Another example was Kayle who posted in Jill's thread and described how her feelings of depression were similar to Jill's. Specifically, Kayle described feeling like there was a 10 ton weight on top of her. However, Kayle encouraged Jill by saying that if she could get through the depression Jill would have proved herself to be a very strong person. Jill responded by thanking Kayle for her message and told her that it helped a lot. In response, Kayle said that she was glad to be of help and encouraged Jill to keep posting. It is interesting to note that

Kayle posted these messages at the same time that she was posting messages seeking help in her own thread.

It seems that the process of seeking help in this online community tended to include reading the messages of others who are in similar situations, feeling emotionally connected to them, and responding to this connection by offering support. Although none of the members specifically commented on how offering support made them feel, it may be reasonable to suggest that offering support to other members gave them a sense of connection with the community and allowed them to identify with a role as supporter. The commitment which several of the supportive community members showed to the other members may indicate that being a supportive member gave them a sense of purpose and identity in the community.

# CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

## Research Findings

All of the participants reported having difficulty expressing their emotions and seeking help offline. Feeling safe online, the authors of the threads wrote about the experiences that triggered feelings of depression, despair, and pain. They also read the messages of other participants and asked the community for support and advice. Some authors wrote messages offering support to other authors. Through the expression of personal stories, seeking help, and providing help, the participants formed relationships online. These relationships became the basis of a community based source of social support and forum for self expression.

Participants reported specific life issues that they perceived to cause distress. The identified stressors often reflected common adolescent developmental themes, including identity, meaning, and interpersonal relationships. However, the participants in the study reported feeling overwhelmed and helpless in response to these issues. Several authors reported believing suicide was the best "way out."

Participants reported feeling alone in their experiences and isolated by the breakdown of relationships in their lives. Seeing no other way to connect, they sought help online. The Internet offered a way to express themselves anonymously, connect with others in a forum they could access whenever they needed to, and control their involvement. Feeling safe, the participants described their feelings, read about the feelings and experiences of others, and provided

support where they felt able.

The participants appeared to use the message board in two main ways: to tell others about their experiences and to seek feedback and support. Authors often told detailed stories about their feelings and ongoing experiences. They seemed to especially value having their messages read by others who were having similar experiences. After reading the messages, other members of the community offered informational, emotional, esteem, and social network support.

The type of support provided depended on the author's needs. The trained volunteers provided consistent support and other community members provided personal empathy and advice. The participants formed a community by developing relationships based on self expression and support. This community context facilitated the process of seeking and providing support online.

## Integration with Existing Literature

### *Participants' Experiences of Being Suicidal*

Reading the messages on the board provided a sense of following the writers through their experiences. Because the messages often described feelings that the authors were experiencing as they wrote the message, an analysis of these messages results in a description of the experiences of the authors that is not filtered by retrospect. All of the authors wrote about their experiences with being suicidal.

Authors reported anxiety, depression, distress, self harm, and repeated suicide attempts. Authors often wrote messages in which they described intense emotional distress, used metaphors to describe their experiences, and expressed

frustration when they could not find the words to represent their feelings. One author used song lyrics to help express her feelings of pain and hopelessness. Authors often reported that they had experienced thoughts and feelings of being distressed for several months or years before writing on the message board. The experiences that they reported in their messages often indicated cycles of improvement and regression repeatedly over time. These cycles were characterized by highs and lows in emotional state related to several factors. The concept of being suicidal as a process (Chesley & Loring-McNulty, 2003) was supported by the stories of the authors in this study.

*Developmental triggers*

Some authors reported that they were considering suicide in response to intense feelings triggered by specific life events or ongoing issues. Several of the triggers that were reported were related to common adolescent developmental issues (Greenfield, 2004; Lerner, 2002). The issues suggested in this study include: identity formation, search for meaning, peer relationships, and parent relationships.

The results of this study support the findings of other researchers that adolescents use the Internet to explore their senses of identity (Maczewski, 2002). However, the participants in this study describe identity exploration within the context of significant emotional distress. In some of the messages participants reported being distressed enough about issues related to their perceptions of their identities (e.g. sexual orientation, vocational goals) that they were considering suicide. This finding supports those of Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, and Tynes

(2004) who found that adolescents online discussed developmental issues such as sexuality and identity. In other messages participants wrote about how their experiences of emotional distress influenced their senses of self (e.g. statements like "I'm just hopeless," or "I'm not even strong enough to stop cutting myself"). The search for meaning is also a common issue in adolescence (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001) and was reported by the participants in this study as one source of intense angst. Specifically, one author reported concluding that life has no meaning and was therefore not worth living.

Interpersonal relationships were also frequently reported as a main source of emotional distress and lead to feelings of depression, anxiety, guilt, and thoughts of suicide. Discord in peer and parent relationships were both commonly reported as triggers for suicidal thoughts. Arguments, fights, perceived betrayal, and perceived judgment were reported to lead to strong emotional reactions, self harm behaviour, and thoughts about suicide. Relationships with parents and peers were both reported to be sources of strength when intact and distress when broken. Although other literature (Lerner, 2002) has emphasized the tendency of adolescents to move from their parents and toward their peers, the participants in this study appeared to be more concerned about the state of the relationships than the type. The importance of relationships was also reflected in the participants' responses to distress: to seek connection with their peers online. The finding mirrors that of Suzuski and Calzo (2004) who found that adolescents used Internet-based communication to express themselves and seek advice for issues such as sexuality and relationships.

Finally, relationship strength influences emotional state directly by causing or ameliorating loneliness and indirectly by facilitating exploration identity and seeking meaning (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001). Authors reported that the state of important relationships influenced their perceptions of themselves. Participants also reported feeling as though life was meaningful and worth living when they felt connected to someone whom they cared about, but that it was less meaningful alone. Specifically, the author's stories support the finding that the breakdown of relationships leads to feelings of loneliness and isolation (Mahon, Yarcheski, & Yarcheski, 1998), decreased social support systems, and is related to suicidal behaviour (Bostik, 2003).

*Loneliness on the Message Board*

The results of this study support the findings of other researchers that the breakdown of offline relationships leads to mental distress, self harm, and suicidal ideation. When relationships breakdown, authors report feeling alone in their experiences of pain and despair. Although the results of this study support those of Thurlow and McKay (2003) that the Internet is a main form of communication for adolescents, they do not contribute to the discussion of whether the loneliness experienced by adolescents online results in or is a result of Internet use. This study describes how authors used the Internet to cope with feeling alone.

Community members often reminded the authors that they were not alone and that other authors on the message board understood their experiences. Authors demonstrated their understanding by expressing empathy in the threads of different authors. Authors also reported that reading the stories written by other

authors helped them to feel understood. Consistent with Eastin and Larose (2004) it seems that the authors in this study felt isolated, sought help, and found it. Morahan-Martin (2003) who found that online relationships may be satisfying for individuals who are feeling isolated.

*The Internet as a safe place to connect*

The authors in this study reported that they wrote on the message board because they perceived the Internet as a safe place to express their thoughts and feelings. Modern adolescents experience distress related to life events and developmental issues that may lead to feeling loneliness, depression and thinking about suicide. Internet technology provides a communication forum where adolescents feel safe to discuss personal problems (Barrera, Glasgow, & Feil, 2002) and seek and receive written social support. Previous research has found that adolescents feel more comfortable talking about especially sensitive issues such as sexuality and health online (Subrahamyam, Greenfield, & Tynes, 2004; Suzuki & Calzo, 2004). The participants in the present study indicated that they felt safer online discussing developmental issues that they found distressing. Specifically, participants reported that relationship issues were easier to discuss online because the other individuals involved were not part of the online community. The results of the present study highlighted aspects of Internet communication suggested by other researchers (Walther & Boyd, 2002; Salem & Bogat, 2000) that facilitate self expression and support seeking. These features include anonymity, access, and control. These features facilitate a feeling of safety that leads to disinhibition and increased personal expression.

*Anonymity*

Consistent with Salem and Bogat (2000), anonymity was frequently reported as a contributing to the feeling of safety. Specifically, authors reported feeling safe to talk about self harm behaviours, suicidal thoughts, and relationship issues because the other members did not know them in "real life". Previous research has not examined the specific importance of anonymity for adolescents who are thinking about suicide. Authors in this study reported that they were especially hesitant about telling others how they were feeling because others would view them negatively. Although this hesitance is not unique to adolescence, this age group may be even more reluctant to seek help because of the importance of peer relationships during this developmental period. The anonymity offered by Internet-based communication appeared to allow the individuals an opportunity to feel safe enough to begin seeking help.

*Access*

Participants often utilized the unlimited access to the message board by writing about an incident immediately after it happened or about feelings of hopelessness in the moment when they needed support the most. This accessibility was also reflected in the responses of the other community members, who often posted within a few hours. Authors appeared to value the unlimited access to the online support, including one author who reported writing from the hospital.

*Control*

Individuals tend to feel safer when they have greater control of the situation. Internet-based communication allows individuals to control the frequency with which they write messages and time to decide what to write. Participants in this study began writing threads when they were in need of support, posted as often as they needed, and stopped writing when they were ready. Authors often did not post for weeks when they were feeling well, and in one case, reported that they ceased writing in a thread because the focus issue had been resolved.

Although the messages were available to them all of the time, the participants controlled the amount that they accessed the board. In this way, the participants in this study were in control of the amount of social support they received. Previous research suggested that the more time available to compose messages online also allows an author to control what they express to others (Waldron, Lavitt, & Kelley, 2000). Although the participants did not comment on the amount of time spent writing messages, authors often wrote extensive descriptions about their experiences, and commented that they would have had difficulty expressing themselves verbally. Supportive community members also appeared to compose carefully worded messages that may have been more difficult with verbal communication. In some messages, the trained volunteers included a number of references to resources that may not have been provided offline because of the time needed to find them. The time needed for these

activities is collapsed for the reader of the messages, giving the appearance of a smooth exchange of ideas.

*Hyperpersonal/disinhibition effect*

Similar to other research on online relationships (King & Moreggi, 1998; Walther & Boyd, 2002; Wright & Bell, 2003), the results of this study support the hyperpersonal/disinhibition effect. Specifically, authors reported feeling safe enough to tell the community things that they would not tell anyone else in their lives. Furthermore, they reported feeling that other members' experiences closely resembled their own and of feeling understood by the online community members where they did not feel understood by others in their lives. Similarly to the findings of Waldron, Lavitt, and Kelley (2000), participants also reported feeling as though they are able to express themselves better online because they have more time to think about what they wished to say and the ability to express it the way that they felt best represented the experiences.

*Online Support Message Boards Facilitate Adolescent Resiliency*

The authors in this study used the message boards to facilitate two main processes: connecting with others and the expression of their experiences. Researchers of Internet-based communication have suggested that both posts and stored archives represent textual narratives of people's lives (Sixsmith, 2001). Furthermore, the results of this study support those of Walther and Boyd (2002) who suggested that online communication is ideal for narrative expression because individuals have more time to think about their written messages and have an unlimited audience. When individuals respond to each other's messages,

Internet-based communication becomes a social forum that has phenomenological reality to the participants, despite the lack of physical presence (Sixsmith, 2001). This process of narrative expression and social feedback facilitates the development of an online community that fosters resilience.

*Narrative Expression*

The earliest human experiences were expressed through stories and songs. Telling stories is still a main form of representing and communicating our experiences to others. These stories often include metaphors and themes that represent important aspects of an individuals experiences. The expression of these experiences help to organize one's experiences and facilitate emotional regulation (Freedman & Combs, 1996). As such, narrative expression through the telling of stories is a useful tool that is commonly used by adolescents to negotiate developmental issues such as identity exploration and to cope with difficult emotions. Griffin (2004) suggested that self disclosure online may be viewed as a form of narrative expression which has therapeutic value by facilitating the organization of experience as meaningful.

The authors in this study used narrative expression not only to express their experiences, but also as a tool to understand their intense feelings. Through telling their stories online, individuals are encouraged to examine their experiences thoughtfully and connect with thoughts and feelings about the experience. Sometimes their expressions took the form of poetry or a series of short messages and sometimes the story was one long message. In some ways writing on the message board resembled writing in a journal where the story was

updated as it unfolded. In each message, there was an assumption that the reader had read the previous messages or could refer to them if needed.

Also similar to journal writing, the message board was available any time and therefore the messages represented the experiences of the authors when they needed to express themselves, rather than when the readers were ready. Because of this, the messages may represent a more basic processing of experiences than if they had been written at a later date. One example of how these messages may be different was the focus on emotions that was represented. Several authors who reported feeling particularly upset in an individual message, would describe how they were feeling in intense detail, and would write relatively little about other options that they perceived, plans they had, or insight into how they may have felt differently in the past or may in the future.

The results of this study echo those of other authors (Alexander, Peterson, & Hollingshead, 2003; Wright & Bell, 2003) who found that one of the primary purposes of online social support was sharing life stories. Although it is impossible to determine the veracity of the stories as they correlate to real life events, the psychological importance of narrative expression may be as, if not more, valid (Freeman & Combs, 1996). The therapeutic value of telling one's story has been explored by Griffin (2004) who reviewed the literature and suggested that research on narrative expression can be used to facilitate an understanding of self-disclosure online.

*Narratives in a Community Context*

Walther and Boyd (2002) found that many online messages concluded

with the question: has anyone else had the same experience? This type of question was also common in the messages by the participants in the present study. Many of the messages included an acknowledgement that they would be read by others in the community, suggesting that it is important to the authors that their stories are read by others. This result supports other research that suggested the importance of having others witness the telling of a personal narrative, particularly in identity development (Meekums, 2005). Furthermore, the authors in the present study commonly stated the importance of having their messages read by others who have a personal understanding of their experiences. This suggests that the author receives the most benefit from writing a message and having that message read by someone who is familiar with the author's experience. Such familiarity is best fostered in a community where individuals act as both story tellers (authors) and witnesses (supportive community members) interchangeably. This is the type of community that is described by the results of the present study, where community members often demonstrated personal understanding of the experiences of other authors by writing their own stories in their own threads.

*Connecting with Others*

The supportive community members often responded to the authors by indicating that they felt a connection with the authors experiences, and wished to provide support. This support took several forms, depending on what authors stated that they required from the community. Most often, authors stated the desire to hear that their feelings were valid and that others understood their

experiences. However, authors also asked specific questions of the community such as, "What can I do to make more friends at school?" These questions were also responded to with specific advice and encouragement to follow-through on the advice. Thus, reciprocal communication allowed feelings of connection to develop among the members. The individual relationships that developed online combined to form a community were authors felt safe to express themselves without negative feedback and receive social support.

Research has also found that increased social support is associated with increases in psychological wellbeing and resiliency (Mahon, Yarcheski, & Yarcheski, 1998). Although the results of this study do not include outcome measures of wellbeing or resiliency, the positive feedback of the authors in the study support the research suggesting that social support facilitates positive adjustment for adolescents. Furthermore, it seems that online social support resembles offline social support in many ways. Further research is needed to assess whether online social support results in the same positive outcome as offline social support.

### *Social Support Online*

Participants in the present study often reported feeling that they had insufficient support systems. Furthermore, many reported the desire for specific types of social support such as those suggested by Walther and Boyd (2002) including informational support (advice, factual input, feedback), emotional support (expressions of caring, empathy, affection, etc), esteem support (expressing admiration for one's worth/abilities), and social network support

(feeling part of a community). Each of these types of support were offered by the supportive members of the community at different times. The types of support provided are similar to the group for depressed participants described by Salem, Bogat, and Reid (1997) because of similar opportunities for social support and self expression. However, this message board discouraged members from connecting with each other offline, unlike the other online support programs (Alexander, Peterson, & Hollongshead, 2003).

Informational support was most often provided by the trained volunteers when they referred the authors to other webpages that listed counselling in their geographic region, by provided specific counselling referrals, by providing specific suggestions (e.g. snapping an elastic band on their wrist rather than cutting themselves), or by offering specific advice on how to deal with an interpersonal issue. The other supportive community members often provided advice from their own experiences. Specific informational support (e.g. a counselling referral) was generally offered when requested by the author, whereas emotional support and social network support were provided in most supportive messages.

The nature of emotional support was consistent throughout the messages written by the trained volunteers. These messages included empathy, normalization, and validation. The supportive community members' messages often included similar types of statements. These are consistent with the types of statements that other authors have found in offline social support (summarized by Andersson, 1998). The supportive community often wrote empowering statements

about the author's character, such as "you are a strong person." These statements are consistent with what researchers (Andersson, 1998) have termed "esteem support".

The development of a sense of community is consistent with what Andersson (1998) referred to as social network support. Social network support provides the individuals with a sense that there is a community that cares for them and is available to provide other forms of specific support when needed. Specifically, the supportive members emphasized that they were there for the authors and encouraged them to continue participating in the community. Similarly, the authors reported that they valued knowing that they would receive non-judgmental feedback from the other members of the community. This type of support may have allowed participants to feel that they were not alone in their experiences.

### *Community Based Social Support*

The results of the present study emphasize the importance of community as a context for social support. This differs somewhat from the understanding of social support that is suggested by other researchers, where social support is often defined in terms of single interactions, rather than the context of the relationship within which the support is provided (Thoits, 1982, Weinberg & Marlowe, 1983). Several of the participants in the present study emphasized the importance of expressing their thoughts and feelings to a community who understood, suggesting that the online community context created the opportunity for participants to seek and receive social support that they would not have otherwise.

The concept of online community has been controversial in the literature. What most people imagine when they think of a community is a village in which everyone knows each other and look out for one another. This image contains two senses of the word "community," *locational* community and *relational* community. Bess, Fisher, Sonn, and Bishop (2002) describe locational community based on geographic proximity, and the newer concept of relational community, which is based on common interest. Location is not always sufficient basis for community any longer, particularly in major urban centers. Where some authors suggest that community is a concept that requires physical proximity, others have argued that it is enough for community members to feel included in a community (Bess , et al., 2002).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) suggested that a sense of community includes feelings of membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Because the participants in this study reported each of these elements in their online discussions, the results of this study support those of Roberts, Smith, and Pollock (2001) who suggest that an online group may be described as a community. Furthermore, the theme of community in the present study supports the findings of other researchers that self disclosure (Tichon & Shapiro, 2003) and supportive communication (Alexander, Peterson, & Hollingshead, 2003) contribute to develop a sense of group identity and community. Barak and Wander-Schwartz (2000) reported increased emotional support and group cohesion over time in an Internet-based group.

*Community development*

The results of this study also support an effect summarized by Salem, Bogat, and Reid (1997), termed "helper-therapy." The researchers noted that providing support to others can be even more beneficial than receiving support, where those who offered support also reported more positive adjustment than those who did not. Tichon and Shapiro's (2003) findings support the helper-therapy principle in an online support group for children who have disabilities, where members were both support seekers and support providers. These authors further suggest that the reciprocal exchange of support contributes to the development of a group into a community, rather than simply a source of specific social support. King and Moreggi (1998) suggested that the term "mutual aid" is the best description of online support because it reflects the helper-therapy aspect of the group where by each person is both the helper and the one receiving help. Providing and receiving social support are both ways in which the community developed, which then provided a context for continued community based support.

The results of the present study not only support the suggestion that the message board is an online community, but also describe how the community developed. Several of the participants began asking for support from other members, then later began also writing to support others. In this way, social support and sense of community acted reciprocally to contribute to a context where adolescents may feel safe to express their needs, seek support, and connect with others. This finding supports the idea of social support as a process

(Andersson, 1998), but adds that individuals may be more likely to seek support and offer support in the context of a community in which they feel safe. The online support message board in this study is best described as an online community where adolescents may seek, receive, and provide social support.

## Internet-based Suicide Prevention

The seriousness of adolescent suicide warrants a perspective on suicide prevention that includes intervention at several stages of the process of being suicidal. Participants reported experiencing feelings of depression and despair and engaging in self harm behaviour before posting online. Participants also reported repeated suicide attempts. Understanding the emotional and developmental influences on an adolescent's decision to harm themselves will facilitate prevention strategies specific to adolescents. Participants in this study felt safe using Internet-based communication to express their feelings, connect with others, and receive social support. These results indicate that the Internet may provide an important forum to connect with suicidal adolescents before they reach a crisis and continue with consistent support throughout their experiences.

### *Online suicide intervention and prevention*

Therapists and volunteers working with suicidal adolescents must consider the role of adolescent developmental issues on thoughts of suicide. Specifically, adolescents consider suicide to deal with feelings that are related real life issues. These issues are often related to their perceptions of themselves and their relationships with their parents and peers. Understanding how an adolescent perceives these life experiences is central to understanding their motivation for

suicide. Considering these factors allows one to understand suicide as a process whereby an individual's feelings and thoughts change over time and are influenced by developmental issues and relationships with others. This perspective supports the suggestion that it is best to situate suicide prevention strategies in a sustainable community context. Internet-based suicide prevention strategies provide one opportunity for adolescents to begin the process of seeking help.

Adolescents seek help online because they feel safe doing so. This is especially true for adolescents who feel as though seeking help offline poses more risks than they are willing to take. These risks include stigma, being pressured into counselling, and being hospitalized against their will. The Internet affords anonymity that makes intervention unlikely and allows an individual to feel free to express their thoughts and feelings. Adolescents in this study used the site in a number of ways to cope with their feelings. They expressed themselves by writing narratives about their experiences, asked for various types of social support, and received support from the other members of the community. The supportive members of the community helped to establish a context where other members felt heard, validated, valued, helped, and helpful. When individuals feel connected to a community where they express themselves, supportive community members have the opportunity to recognize signs of suicidality before the individual reaches a state of crisis. Being familiar with the individual's story, supportive community members can encourage the individual to pursue more in-depth counselling without breaking the individual's sense of autonomy. In this study,

Internet-based communication was shown to be a support tool that was client driven and sustained by peers, available all the time, and cost effective (White & Dorman, 2001).

Many of the same aspects of Internet-based communication that allow adolescents to feel safe expressing themselves online also prevent Internet-based social support from being able to replace individual or group therapy with a trained professional. However, all of the participants in the present study were encouraged by supportive community members to consider contacting a counsellor with whom they felt comfortable. Several of the authors also reported talking to counsellors and reported both positive and negative experiences. In these cases, the community was able to follow-up with questions about what made the experience positive or negative, and encourage the authors to keep writing about what steps they were taking to seek help offline. When suicide is conceptualized as a process where intervention may occur at many points and may take many different forms, Internet-based social support may provide a valuable addition to suicide prevention strategies.

## Limitations of the Study

There is some question as to the accuracy of events reported in the anonymous context of the Internet. Specifically, it is impossible to objectively determine basic demographic information about the participants. It is also impossible to establish the accuracy of any reported events because there is no way to confirm or dispute the accuracy of events and experiences offline. There is also an argument to be made for the idea that any report of an experience is

accurate inasmuch as it represents the participants understanding of their experience at the time of reporting, regardless of objective "reality."

This study is limited to describing the experiences of participants who have Internet access and feel comfortable seeking support online. Because the demographics of the participants in the study cannot be confirmed, it is unclear whether this study describes the experiences of adolescents or can be said to describe the experiences of a larger age range. Although the target population of the website is localized to one urban center, it is known that at least one of the participants in the study lived in Ontario and one in the United Kingdom. Therefore, although this study may describe the experiences of adolescents from the local community, it may also be representative of other individuals experiencing similar suicidal feelings in other parts of the world.

Only three months of conversations were represented in this study. Several of the participants in this study were part of the online community for several months before and after the data were collected. Therefore this study is a snapshot of a much longer-term support system and a deeper understanding of the longer-term process would be gained from study of more months than are included here. Furthermore, because there is no interaction between researcher and participant, there is no opportunity to explore areas of inquiry that an interview may reveal as particularly poignant.

## Implications for Future Research

An initial review of online research suggests that, although much is known, there are many more unknowns. The results of this study lead to a number

of implications for further research in understanding adolescent suicidality, Internet-based communication, and suicide prevention. Specifically, more detailed study is needed to determine what young people actually do and say with new technologies and how patterns of offline social interaction are being expressed online (e.g. cliques and crowds). Further examination of how young people rate, compare, and discuss offline and online interactions would also help us understand the risks and potential benefits of online social relationships. A more thorough understanding of the ways that communication technologies are addressing the needs of at-risk young people would help improve websites aimed at ameliorating those risks (Thurlow and McKay, 2003).

Participants in this study provided a description of a number of issues that contributed to their thoughts and feelings related to suicide. Further research may explore whether these experiences are different than those of adolescents who do not seek help online. Alternately, a comparison may be made between the types of disclosures that an individual feels comfortable making online versus offline.

This study examined how the Internet is being used by adolescents for social support. Future research may focus on how similar social support services can be targeted at other groups who are at high risk for suicide, such as rural and native communities. The results of this study are based on interpretations made from the messages written. Further research may include interviews with the participants to compare how they retrospectively perceived the experience of seeking support online.

The data from this study included only messages written on the "suicide" category of the message board. It is likely that the participants also wrote messages in other topics on the same website which were not included. They also reported participating in the online chat that was available on the website. An examination of the interactions on these other parts of the website may provide a more comprehensive view of how the authors are seeking and receiving support online.

Finally, the present study provides a description of a novel social support service, but provides no measures of outcome. Future research may assess the efficacy of Internet-based social support for specific outcome measures such as suicide prevention, well-being, perception of social support, and connection with offline resources. Specific research may focus on what happens after authors stop posting on the site.

## Conclusions

Adolescence is a developmental phase that presents issues with which adolescents may have difficulty dealing. In extreme cases, these issues may trigger feelings of depression and despair, and acts of self harm and suicide. Because adolescents may be particularly self conscious about seeking help, the Internet provides opportunities for adolescents to seek support when they may not otherwise do so. For the participants in this study, online social support was characterized by narrative expression and the development of supportive relationships in a community context. This context may be the basis for

consistent, accessible, peer based social support for adolescents who are dealing with feelings and experiences related to suicide.

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